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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Accompanying the document

Proposal for a Council Recommendation

on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union

{COM(2022) 15 final}

Contents

1. Introduction

Volunteering, both within and beyond the Union, constitutes a rich experience in a non-formal and informal learning context and enhances young people's personal, socio-educational and professional development, active citizenship, civic participation and employability. In addition, volunteering is an expression of solidarity, which is at the core of the European project. Transnational volunteering across the EU contains an additional dimension, namely that of helping a community in a different country, increasing intercultural understanding, and learning and working in a foreign language. The European labour market values multilingualism, multiculturalism and adaptability. Experience shows that moving out of one's comfort zone by volunteering in a different country strongly impacts a young person's personal and professional development. Opening up more transnational volunteering opportunities for Europe's young people translates into their increased employability, greater self-confidence, and greater support for the European project through a heightened sense of European citizenship.

Europe's young people have been engaging in volunteering activities for a long time, thereby supporting local communities and responding to unmet societal needs. Volunteering activities have the concrete potential to mobilise young people for positive causes and help them develop essential skills and competences for their own development. This is true for all young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown once again that young people were quick to rise to the challenge and to express their solidarity, including inter-generational solidarity, through practical action. At the same time, the pandemic has had dramatic effects on young people's mental health, education and employment. For all these reasons, President von der Leyen proposed to make 2022 the European Year of Youth, "a year dedicated to empowering those who have dedicated so much to others".

This Staff Working Document accompanies and supports the proposal for a Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union and replaces the Council Recommendation of 20 November 2008 on the same topic. It contains information on the supporting evidence that underpins the Commission proposal for a new Council Recommendation. The proposal retains the main messages of the 2008 Communication, since many of them remain crucial, but supplements and updates them. It aims to facilitate transnational youth volunteering, propose policy guidance to enhance the inclusiveness, quality, recognition and sustainability dimensions of transnational youth volunteering, facilitate the complementarity between volunteering schemes in Member States and the European Solidarity Corps, and encourage mutual learning and networking in the field of transnational youth volunteering activities.

This Staff Working Document provides an overview of the steps undertaken to replace the 2008 Council Recommendation with a new Recommendation. It starts with a summary of the 2008 Council Recommendation, to provide the general context, and then presents the main outcomes of an evaluation, a study, and an expert group report. An annex contains the synopsis report on the consultation activities undertaken.

2. State of play of cross-border volunteer mobility in the EU

2.1 The 2008 Council recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union

On 20 November 2008, the Council adopted a recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union. The main objective of the Council Recommendation was to provide more cross-border volunteering opportunities for young people. The recommendation suggests raising awareness of and capacity for cross-border volunteering opportunities, reducing barriers to participation, increasing the recognition of the experience and the inclusiveness of the activity.

More specifically, the recommendation defines cross-border volunteering, recognises its benefits and identifies common potential obstacles to volunteer mobility; it provides a framework for Member States to intensify their cooperation in the field. The Council recommended that Member States promote the mobility of young volunteers by enhancing the conditions for cooperation between volunteering organisations across Europe. In accordance with their national frameworks, the Member States should raise awareness of volunteering and its benefits nationally and improve access to information on cross-border volunteering, disseminate it among potential target groups, and simplify the relevant administrative procedures. They should support the development of hosting capacity among the organisations engaged in cross-border volunteering, and provide contact points in the form of National Agencies. To reduce barriers to cross-border volunteering, the Member States should increase awareness of the importance of intercultural competences and language learning among young people. Furthermore, they should assure quality and provide sufficient information about cross-border volunteering activities and organisations. The Member States should ensure that volunteers are not discriminated against as a result of national social protection policies such as health care and social welfare, and that special visas and residence permits for third country nationals are easy to obtain. The recommendation also invited to promote appropriate recognition of competences gained through volunteering, also using EU-wide instruments such as Europass and Youthpass. People with fewer opportunities should be given particular attention to enhance their access to cross-border voluntary activities.

2.2 Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU

An evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy (EUYS) and the 2008 Council Recommendation undertaken in 2015-2016[1] found out that the 2008 Recommendation addressed some of the very relevant and persistent issues and obstacles to cross-border volunteering. The general perception among stakeholders was that the 2008 Council Recommendation was one of the key initiatives in this field, and it benefitted from having been integrated in a long-term youth cooperation framework, which allowed cross-border volunteering to be kept in EU cooperation activities. The internationalisation and mobility aspects of volunteering moved up on the agenda in several

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=SWD(2017)281&lang=en

countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia), and legal frameworks and tools were developed in a number of Member States to recognise its value. The Strategy also complemented Member States' efforts of increasing cross-border volunteering opportunities through enhancing the mobilisation of funds for the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and the support to the dissemination of information. At the same time, it is important to note that it was a challenge during the evaluation to distinguish the influence of activities launched under the auspices of the Recommendation from the volunteering activities under the 2010-2018 EUYS. The assumptions made about the positive effects of the Council Recommendation cannot be clearly verified, as the expected effects are indirectly linked to the results of the Recommendation. Actions implemented within the framework of the Council Recommendation are generally considered as complementary to other voluntary activities organised or implemented by the youth organisations consulted. Nevertheless, the evaluation affirms that all action lines of the Council Recommendation are still relevant to the current needs and problems of young volunteers and volunteering organisations.

Information about and dissemination of cross-border volunteering opportunities was identified an essential aspect, as the interest to volunteer is low in some Member States (Portugal, Estonia, Sweden, Lithuania, Hungary). The problem to find suitable volunteers occurs in some cases, which often comes from the lack of awareness about the opportunities, and volunteering abroad is less popular among young people than participating in the Erasmus+ university exchanges. Therefore, awareness-raising actions remain highly relevant to spread information about the available opportunities. Eurodesks and the European Youth Portal helped young people find information about volunteering opportunities abroad, but the tools are generally not well-know, and concerns exist in connection with user aspects and up-to-date information. In some countries (Italy, Spain), volunteering serves as an alternative to not finding a job in their home country, and as a consequence, more people from these countries wish to volunteer than the number of available placements (e.g. in Estonia and Sweden). This demonstrates that there is still a great need for developing opportunities for cross-border volunteering within and beyond the European Solidarity Corps programme. In most countries, the European Voluntary Service (predecessor programme of the European Solidarity Corps) proved to be the only opportunity to volunteer abroad and that the majority of the beneficiaries (70%) initiated cross-border activities within Youth in Action/Erasmus+ programme.

The evaluation concluded that there is a need for simplifying the procedures for cross-border volunteering, as such processes were reported to be highly bureaucratic through the European Voluntary Service. However, this creates capacity- and resource-related challenges for local and small-sized NGOs. They also communicated that there is little support to deal with the administrative issues when sending volunteers to non-EU countries. Consequently, the demand for simplifying the procedures remain relevant. The need for better recognition of volunteering experience remained an issue at the time of the evaluation, even though the Recommendation seems to have contributed to the increasing popularity and recognition of the Youthpass and Europass certificates. Member States have taken steps in this field, but the demand for better recognition and validation is still valid. This is underpinned by that fact that many volunteers, who return from abroad, face problems with the value of volunteering experience and skills acquired, as they are often under-estimated and that the recognition of Youthpass by employer still seems to be low.

The inclusion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds was identified as a more pressing issue in 2015 than it had been in 2008, as were visa applications and attitudes towards foreigners in the wake of the migrant crisis. This shows that more work needs to be done to reduce barriers to cross-border mobility for young people from third countries, and make volunteering abroad more accessible for young people with fewer opportunities (NEETs: neither in employment, education or training, young people with disabilities, those from rural areas and youth from migrant and minority background).

The action lines of the Council Recommendation did not adequately address all the needs and challenges of volunteering organisations. One of the most frequently reported need was the increase in quality volunteering projects, which can be limited by insufficient training and capacity coupled with a lack of funding opportunities. The quality of the learning experience is important for the volunteer in order to acquire transferable skills and competences. Consequently, volunteer management should be addresses at policy level and supported in practice. Other emerging needs identified but not addressed by the Recommendation included the lack of stable funding resources and/or the link to the available EU instruments (e.g. Erasmus+), the digitalisation of volunteering, and the introduction of "EU volunteer" status to facilitate visa and tax solutions for cross-border volunteers.

Based on the gathered information, the evaluation recommends the formulation of more ambitious objectives and more explicit links to the EU funding programmes. In order to improve the relevance and coherence of policy level cooperation and funded initiatives, the issue of the Recommendation's action lines being more reflected in the annual or national programme priorities of the Erasmus+ was also raised by the evaluation.

All in all the evaluation concludes that although the 2008 Council Recommendation managed to address and identify the needs of young volunteers and volunteering organisations, they remained relevant. This was particularly the case in the fields of quality in 'volunteer management', information and dissemination activities on cross-border volunteering opportunities accompanied by the rights and responsibilities of the volunteers, making volunteering mobility more accessible to young people with fewer opportunities and reducing barriers to volunteering mobility.

2.3 Study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities

The study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities[2] was carried out between June 2019 and January 2020 by PPMI Group with the assistance of the Office for Economic Policy and Regional Development as a subcontractor, as well as individual external experts. The purpose of the study was to identify the key obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities that persist at policy and organisational levels across the EU Member States, and to formulate concrete policy recommendations that can be fed directly into the review of the

[2] Study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities, PPMI Group in cooperation with EPRD, 2020, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1a7042cb-e678-11ea-ad25-01aa75ed71a1

Recommendation. The study complements the work of the Expert Group on the mobility of young volunteers and cross-border as well. The main focus of the study was volunteering, but it also covered traineeships and jobs within the solidarity field to the extent that they are relevant to the activities of the European Solidarity Corps programme.

This study required the collection, processing and synthesising of both qualitative and quantitative data. It embraced a mixed-methods research design, tailored by study team specifically for this assignment. These included extensive desk research and the mapping of information at country level (resulting in the preparation of 28 country fiches), analysis of administrative and monitoring data on European Solidarity Corps projects and the Commission's survey of European Voluntary Service participants. Interviews with officials from the European Commission, stakeholders at EU level, National Agencies and National Authorities, as well as representatives of the schemes/projects selected for good-practice case studies and a survey of organisations that hold the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label or are accredited under Erasmus+ youth volunteering were carried out. In addition, five good-practice case studies were prepared and a workshop with the Expert Group on the mobility of young volunteers and cross-border solidarity was organised in Brussels to discuss the study's findings.

2.3.1 Main findings of the study

The study underlines the importance of the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy in terms of youth solidarity, as it includes the removal of the obstacles to and the facilitation of volunteering among its objectives. The Strategy aims to expand the 2008 Council Recommendation on the cross-border mobility of volunteers, and to strengthen the potential and inclusiveness of the European Solidarity Corps programme through policy cooperation and community building.

Youth participation in organised volunteering activities has been increasing since 2011, but the participation of young people is still relatively low. The number of volunteers going abroad grew in most countries with Greece and Austria having the sharpest increase rate (8%). Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and the Netherlands demonstrated a decrease in the number of this category, while stagnation could be observed in Latvia. **In general, the share of cross-border volunteers remains relatively low (at 8%) when compared to in-country solidarity activities**, although the overall increase of 2% between 2014 and 2017 demonstrates a positive trend.

Volunteering traditions and cultures differ among the Member States, but volunteering is popular and developing. **People generally prefer episodic and occasional (short-term and spontaneous) volunteering activities to regularly organised ones**, which usually require long-term commitment. This also underpins the problem of finding dedicated long-term volunteers, which had been identified as a challenge in previous studies as well. Apart from the low popularity of cross-border volunteering, the tradition and culture of volunteering in the EU appear to be well-developed and favourable to both volunteers and volunteering organisations. The study divides Member States into four categories on the basis of volunteering culture and tradition: Member States with comparatively well-developed tradition of volunteering with the related activities being popular and valued by society; countries that have a volunteering tradition, but solidarity activities are relatively unpopular; Member States with a developing

volunteering tradition, but where such activities are popular and countries with developing volunteering tradition, where solidarity activities are relatively unpopular. Based on these categories, the study concludes that **different measures are needed to address the existing obstacles and challenges in Member States**.

17 Member States (Italy, Spain, Sweden, Austria, Slovenia, France, Slovakia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Malta, Spain) possess one or more national/regional schemes supporting cross-border solidarity activities, although these do not necessarily target young people. However, the absence of a national cross-border volunteering scheme does not mean that no volunteering opportunities/activities exist in that country. Volunteering activities in these Member States may be provided by privately run organisations, some of which can be international. **The supply for cross-border volunteering opportunities varies across Europe**. The study found that there are opportunities for the mobility of EU volunteers to non-European countries, bilateral volunteering projects usually between neighbouring countries and broader national civic schemes have developed opportunities for foreign exchanges as well. **For Romania, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Portugal, Cyprus and Croatia however the European Solidarity Corps Programme is the only structured cross-border volunteering programme offering funding for young persons,** although local organisations in these countries may also provide cross-border volunteering opportunities. The Corps therefore is highly relevant in countries that lack opportunities for young people to engage in cross-border solidarity activities, and it serves as a complementary instrument to other, existing solidarity activities.

The study indicates that **most countries make efforts to build and develop capacities of volunteering organisations** by improving their organisational practices and the competences and skills of the people who manage groups of volunteers. The most common policy instrument is training and information dissemination initiatives organised by public authorities and agencies. Capacity building is also aided by developing different guidelines and standards, which mainly possess recommendatory nature. It can also be observed that there are generally no rigid centralised quality assurance frameworks for volunteering organisations and projects in Member States. The evaluation of individual projects relies largely on the organisations that implement them. **Quality assurance** is usually ensured through the conditions required for organisations to receive public funding, for example with an obligation for financial reporting.

Countries are committed to awareness-raising about cross-border volunteering opportunities for young people, but the **information on available volunteering opportunities are usually not integrated into a single system**. Nevertheless, countries tend to have centralised youth information portal/online volunteering database on the available volunteering opportunities. Awareness-raising actions include the organisation of regular, dedicated events aimed at popularising raising awareness of volunteering and local/municipal volunteering and information centres also contribute to the dissemination of volunteering opportunities.

As far as the 2008 Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union concerned, the study came to similar conclusions as the Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the

EU. The Recommendation provided a clearer understanding of what cross-border volunteering entails, but the lack of quality assurance mechanisms persists and there is still more room in terms of recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering activities. The study concludes that Recommendation pushed volunteering up the on the agenda of policy-makers and into national youth strategies. However, its general provisions makes it difficult to measure the Council Recommendation's impacts, which varied among Member States from widespread stakeholder consultations to having a limited impact and awareness. The non-binding character of the Recommendation and the lack of ambition and direct link to EU funding instruments were listed as major reasons why the Council Recommendation did not have major impact on Member States.

2.3.2 Obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities, according to the study

The study found that **no common definition of solidarity or solidarity activities exists across the EU**, aside from the definition provided by the European Solidarity Corps. This lack of a shared understanding of key terms often leads to poor understanding of the programme. The term "solidarity activities" is not used in connection with volunteering in many Member States.

There are substantial differences in administrative and legal frameworks on volunteering across the Member States. The study concludes that the key barrier in relation to the administrative and regulatory frameworks governing the volunteering field is their diversity, which results in a lack of alignment among EU Member States, and developing common guidelines would be a challenge because of their national circumstances. Most Member States have legal acts and definitions of volunteers and volunteering in place, but they differ significantly and do not ensure a clear legal status for volunteers. Too rigid or loose definitions can lead to barriers and obstacles in terms of working conditions and the definition of roles. Formal and informal types of volunteering can also create obstacles when it comes to the formulation of legal frameworks in Member States. These frameworks can also change dynamically, and in some cases, the process of its development is slower which often stems from the lack of political will. A number of countries do not have a dedicated law on volunteering, but provisions on volunteering are included in other policy documents.

Difficulties in obtaining visa and residence permits as a volunteer coming from a third-country are still relevant.

Provision and portability of entitlements and benefits to volunteers are not uniformly ensured. The provision and portability of entitlements and benefits such as health insurance and unemployment or disability benefits, along with the taxation of various reimbursements, are important factors for long-term cross-border volunteers. Information about the governance of these provisions are scattered in many cases and volunteering and traineeships might fall under the supervision of different policy areas and strategies.

Another key obstacle is the lack of sufficient awareness of cross-border volunteering opportunities. Even though the majority of volunteering organisations agree that sufficient opportunities exist for both in-country and cross-border volunteering, the fragmentation or lack of efforts to raise awareness of the value and benefits of cross-border volunteering experience, as

well as of opportunities to volunteer abroad, are further obstacles identified by the study. Although most EU Members States have instruments and tools aimed at promoting and raising awareness of existing volunteering opportunities, these efforts are usually neither systemic nor integrated and it is one of the key challenges facing the volunteering/solidarity sector in Europe. Lack of awareness can also originate from the differences in the socio-economic background of young people, as persons from disadvantaged groups and those from rural areas are often reported as being less informed.

The study concluded that there is a lack of sufficient recognition of volunteering experience. There is mixed feedback about the employers' perceptions of volunteering experiences and their value. The absence of a unified national framework for the recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering activities (especially for European Solidarity Corps and cross-border volunteering) was identified by a number of stakeholders from different Member States as one of the key challenges and obstacles that provide a disincentive to the participation of young people in (cross-border) volunteering activities. In certain Member States, the formal recognition mechanisms available (for instance Youthpass) are insufficiently integrated, and as a result, newly developed skills often go unrecognised by prospective employers. The ability of the volunteer to communicate the skills and competences they have acquired is also a factor when it comes to recognition.

Even though the majority of volunteering organisations have a positive view on their capacity to implement volunteering activities, **there is a stronger need to ensure the quality of volunteering and increase the capacity of organisations in some areas.** The lack of stable funding was found as a relevant obstacle. The study also identified the need to ensure the quality of volunteering placements. Evidence from a survey indicates that another key obstacle to (cross-border) volunteering and solidarity activities is the misuse of volunteers' work and its exploitation as a substitute for regular work among some host organisations.

The study indicates that the insufficient inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities is still relevant. Desk research confirmed that in a number of countries, volunteering is still widely considered an activity for upper/more affluent classes, and people with fewer opportunities are underrepresented in the sector. However, 67% of the organisations surveyed positively assessed their capacity and willingness to include young people with fewer opportunities in solidarity activities. At the same time, one-third of the organisation reported that negative attitudes towards people with fewer opportunities exist in voluntary organisations. The study determined that the obstacles and challenges faced by the European Solidarity Corps are similar to those pertaining to cross-border solidarity activities in general. However, several additional challenges exist that relate specifically to the development and successful implementation of the Corps.

Besides the above-described obstacles, the study identified a number of individual reasons, which may be obstacles to cross-border volunteering of young people. These reasons include uncertainty or anxiety, lack of confidence and independence, adaptation problems, existing mental and physical conditions, and commitments and not being able to cope with the arising challenges. One of the main concerns is the poor command of foreign languages for both the

volunteering organisations and young people. Financial barriers can occur both on individual and organisational level, and additional financial support is especially important for the inclusion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As reflected in the recently adopted Framework of inclusion measures of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Programmes 2021-2027, persons with disabilities often face costs linked to their disability and targeted financial support may facilitate the participation of young people with disabilities.

2.3.3 Policy recommendations of the study

Based on the above-mentioned findings, the study formulated recommendations to address the key obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities in general. These recommendations are relevant at both national and EU levels. A recommendation was also provided in connection to the structure and implementation of a revised Council Recommendation and possible measures to enhance it, building on the key issues identified in relation to the 2008 Council Recommendation. The recommendations and proposed actions relevant to cross-border volunteering are the following:

— **Increase collaboration to ensure the better alignment of legal and administrative frameworks and knowledge sharing between Member States**

The recommendation entails that Member States should provide openly accessible information about the national and legal administrative framework governing volunteering. YouthWiki could potentially become the main source of information in this area, and it could also further align information. There is also a need for a closer collaboration between Member States by peer-learning activities and exchange of good practice case studies. The new Council Recommendation could also promote measures to be taken in this field.

— **Clarify legal status of volunteers and participants in other solidarity activities**

Member States should take steps towards the clarification of volunteers' legal status and it should include the provisions of obligations and rights of volunteers (entitlements, benefits and their portability). Countries should aim towards a status of volunteers, which would be the same for national schemes with cross-border opportunities and the European programmes. At the same time, the definition of legal rules and regulations, as well as the status of volunteers and participants in other solidarity activities should not be so strict as to make it impossible for communities or local organisations to initiate volunteering activities.

The European Commission could provide guidelines, toolkits and recommendations to Member States. At a later stage, these minimum standards and requirements should be referenced and included in existing instruments.

— **Facilitate the obtaining of visas/residence permits for the purpose of volunteering and other solidarity activities**

Relevant rules need to be fully and correctly implemented and, where appropriate, enforced (in particular the provisions of Directive (EU) 2016/801). In addition, relevant laws of Member States should include volunteering and other solidarity activities as a ground to obtain a visa

and/or residence permit. The development of a fast-track visa procedure with relevant safeguards to avoid fraud is recommended. This could be achieved through special agreements on visa facilitation for participants in EU programmes, but cross-border volunteering that takes place outside EU programmes should also be taken into account.

— **Ensure the provision and portability of social benefits for volunteers**

Member States should clarify the available entitlements and benefits to volunteers, ensure cross-border portability of certain benefits (other than social security benefits) and develop cross-sectoral policies to address social benefits. A review of the relevant rules in order to avoid taxation of benefits is also recommended for Member States. There is a need for agreement between Member States on minimum standards for benefits and entitlements given to cross-border volunteers. The European Commission could mediate these efforts and develop a roadmap with specific recommendations for Member States to implement the minimum European standards agreed for volunteers' benefits and entitlements. Mediation processes could also be supported by the Presidency of the Council.

— **Improve the promotion and outreach of EU and national-level cross-border volunteering schemes**

National Authorities should support the spread of information for example with "one-stop-shop " websites. Member States should be encouraged to promote information as part of formal education and secondary education curricula, and employment agencies could also promote volunteering opportunities as part of skills- and career development. The European Commission could organize cross-ministerial discussions and stakeholder groups and the updates on the European Youth Portal could also be carried out to add information about national-level schemes.

— **Improve the formal and informal recognition within EU Member States of skills and competences acquired through volunteering activities**

The European Commission could update recognition instruments like Youthpass, Europass and Diploma Settlement, and Member States should also be encouraged to use EU recognition instruments. The European Commission and Member States together should support and coordinate various events and initiatives related to recognition, and the sharing of good practices through cross-ministerial and stakeholder meeting should also be facilitated. Societal recognition of volunteering and other solidarity activities at local level should be enhanced through the development of more embedded and sustainable comparative analysis of evidence-based research on the benefits of volunteering in relation to community impact. Support for the further development of quality standards for volunteering is needed as well. Finally, the Commission should encourage the involvement of local policy makers and communities through the development of a new 'quality and community impact label for volunteering'.

— **Support the further development of quality standards for volunteering**

The European Commission should work to further develop quality standards for volunteering, including recommendatory minimum standards and guidelines. It should focus on priorities such

as developing specific strategies, practices, methods and tools to reach and include young people with fewer opportunities in volunteering activities. Specific actions and strategies to ensure that the involvement of volunteers complements and supplements the work of paid staff should be identified.

— **Increase the inclusion within cross-border solidarity activities of young people with fewer opportunities**

In connection with this recommendation, Member States should build on existing inclusion policies, strategic approaches and tools to improve outreach and access of EU programmes to a wider audience. Measures to improve the capacity of local organisations to work with young people with fewer opportunities is also a proposed action for the European Commission and the Member States.

— **Equip the new EU Council recommendation with measurable goals and targets as well as an action plan for implementation**

According to the study, the revised Council Recommendation should be more ambitious and should include more concrete measures, as well as targets to remove obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities. Relevant developments since 2008 and the increased importance of volunteering at the policy level should be considered. It is proposed for Member States to set their own national targets and prioritise specific areas from the Recommendation that are most relevant to their national context. An action plan for implementation and a monitoring framework – providing long-term oversight – should also be developed by the European Commission. This should take into account the individual targets and priorities set by Member States. Actions in order to ensure awareness among key stakeholders and policymakers are also desirable, which could be achieved by creating concrete links to EU funding instruments and programmes, such as to Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.

2.4 Expert group report on Promoting the mobility of young volunteers and cross-border solidarity

An expert group, made up of (public and private) experts from Member States, REY Europe, the European Youth Forum and the Centre for European Volunteering met between September 2019 and September 2020. The above-mentioned study informed the expert group. The report[3] of the expert group was published in October 2021, with the aim to inform and inspire actors interested in the cross-border mobility of volunteers and solidarity activities. It presents examples of good practices in this field, and it also serves to propose inputs to the review of the 2008 Council recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers in Europe.

[3] Expert Group on the mobility of Young volunteers and cross-border solidarity, Background paper to support the Commission in reviewing the 2008 Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers, Ecorys, February 2020 https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/50effcd2-271e-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-235472968

2.4.1. Main developments since 2008

The report introduces the developments that took place since the adoption of the 2008 Council Recommendation, for example **the EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027 period, which was adopted by the Council in November 2018**. Under the 'connect; core area, it invites Member States and the Commission within their respective field of competence to enable access for all young people to cross-border mobility by eliminating obstacles and implementing support measures, with special attention to young people with fewer opportunities. It also calls to encourage young people's engagement in solidarity, promoting support schemes and seeking complementary synergies between EU funding instruments. Furthermore, Member States and the Commission are invited to share best practices and further work on effective systems for validation and recognition of skills and competences gained through solidarity and volunteering activities. This shows that the EU agenda was set to review the 2008 Council Recommendation and to establish an expert group to provide inputs to this exercise.

One of the main developments in the field is the 2016 launch of the European Solidarity Corps programme, which replaced the European Voluntary Service. The Corps extended the programme not only in terms of funding, but also with the introduction of new types of activities, such as traineeships and jobs. Volunteering remained the main action of the programme, and under this action, solidarity activities take the form of voluntary unpaid activities that last from 2 weeks to 12 months. Young people have the opportunity to volunteer for organisations that work for the benefit of communities and in the service of general interest, in the forms of volunteering projects, volunteering partnerships and volunteering teams in high priority areas.

New activities and areas emerged, which can be regarded as possible factors to cross-border solidarity. Cybervolunteering is undertaken via the internet and does not require physical presence or the mobility of the volunteer. It provides new opportunities for less mobile young people, and it can be used to underpin, complement and prepare for later physical mobility. **Service learning** is a 'grey zone' between volunteering and formal education, as it includes placements that are undertaken in a solidarity context but as part of the curriculum of a formal education programme. **Voluntourism** refers to the practice of combining volunteering and a holiday, with people participating in volunteering activities as an integral part of a touristic experience. Many tour operators and NGOs recognised its business potential and started to offer travel packages that include a volunteering experience abroad. However, there is a concern that the introduction of a financial motive opens it up to risks of misuse. **Climate crisis** should also be addressed, as cross-border volunteering activities involve large numbers of people moving across borders in Europe.

The report found that volunteering is increasingly popular among young people, which is demonstrated by a growing demand for it. According to the 2019 Eurobarometer report[4], about 31 % of young people have been involved in organised volunteering activities in 2019. The majority of activities (69 %) are aimed at changing something in the local community, but participation in cross-border volunteering has also increased, with 8 % of young respondents having volunteered abroad in 2019.

[4] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2224

2.4.2 Policy recommendations among different thematic areas

The experts identified 15 themes that need to be addressed in order to determine specific messages and recommendations. Some of these were already included in the 2008 Council Recommendation, while other themes reflected on new developments since the adoption of the Recommendation. The COVID-19 crisis introduced a new type of barrier to the organisation and implementation of cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities. The lessons learnt from the pandemic should be addressed in the new Recommendation due to its impact on these activities. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the expert group decided to keep the original 15 themes, but small amendments and changes were added. The themes were formulated among three categories, namely organisational framework, participants and processes.

Organisational frameworks

1. Capacity building

The theme of the 2008 Council Recommendation in terms of the need for supporting the development of the hosting capacity for cross-border volunteers is still important. Several organisations would commit to cross-border solidarity activities, but they lack the capacity or the funds to prepare young people to go abroad. Budget cuts across Europe worsened this problem in the 5–10 years up to 2019 and it has constrained organisational capacity. The lack of ability to self-assess and self-improve also plays an important role in organisational capacity. The report suggests that the revised recommendation should not only be addressed to 'youth workers', but also explicitly encompass all voluntary organisation practitioners.

Therefore the expert groups recommends to ensure that organisations are able to adequately prepare and monitor/accompany volunteers, as well as offer returning volunteers support to continue their engagement in solidarity activities, especially youth with fewer opportunities. The mobility and training of youth workers and voluntary organisation practitioners should be supported, and cooperation and networking between mobility providers should be strengthened. Furthermore, efforts should be made to strengthen the (financial) sustainability of organisations to ensure the sufficient number of organisations with the motivation and resources to carry out in practice the intentions enshrined in the recommendation. Financial stability is especially important for those organisation whose main revenue comes from physical mobility.

2. Community involvement and impact

The 2008 Recommendation mainly focused on volunteers and the outcomes of their participation. The acquisition of competences and the development of active citizenship were considered as well. However, the report states that besides the hosting community, the sending community should also receive particular attention. It is important to recognise that community impact is also a major benefit of volunteering and solidarity activities.

The specific recommendations in relation to this theme include the recognition of the two beneficiaries of cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities: the individual participants and the communities. Support should be given to returning volunteers to enable them to continue to engage in solidarity activities. The impact of volunteering and solidarity activities should be

emphasised, in particular the value of intercultural exchanges to communities. Programmes should make provisions so that when physical cross-border mobility is not possible, adaptations can easily be made. Programmes should contain clauses that allow budget flexibility and, in extreme cases, budget increases to alleviate the consequences of *force majeure*.

3. Complementarity

The evidence shows that there is a need to create more synergies, complementarities and continuities between the different European and national schemes and initiatives. The new recommendation should reflect the fact that the European Youth Strategy includes an element about the complementarity and synergy between EU funding instruments and national, regional and local schemes. Complementarity between European schemes themselves (such as the European Solidarity Corps, Erasmus internships, Your first EURES job, EU Aid Volunteers[5], Interreg and Europe for Citizens) are also important factors.

As for the recommendations for this theme, the report proposes the promotion of peer learning and the exchange of good practice, the mutual recognition of quality labels and other support mechanisms between European and national/regional schemes for cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities to reduce the administrative work of the organisations involved. The Youth Wiki database should be used to promote and inform local, national and European cross-border volunteering schemes in a coherent way. In crisis situations that prevent cross-border mobility, established relationships and complementarity between EU-funded cross-border schemes and national schemes should be leveraged as essential tools for finding flexible, fast and suitable solutions for reassigning participants.

4. Knowledge sharing and networking

Sharing knowledge and learning between organisations participating in cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities is crucial to improve the quality of activities and practices in Europe. Platforms for knowledge sharing already exist (European Youth Portal, SALTO-YOUTH centres, Youth Wiki database), as well as various communities of practice. Alumni networks can also constitute another important resource. However, there is potential for the further development of this aspect and exploitation of the opportunities presented. It is also important to consider relevant organisations outside the youth sector, as expertise and experience on issues impinging on cross-border volunteering and solidarity are distributed among many actors.

Recommendation for this theme include the better use of existing spaces, where resources and knowledge can be shared among Member States and NGOs. Space for innovation and peer learning activities should be made available to further develop new forms and methods of volunteering. Networking through alumni communities and the exchange of youth workers and voluntary organisation practitioners should be intensified. Enhanced training and qualification opportunities should be made available.

Participants

[5] The EU Aid Volunteers programme allowed for the deployment of 788 volunteers to third countries between 2016 and 2020, out of which 86% were aged between 18 and 35 years old.

5. Access and inclusion

International volunteering and cross-border solidarity activities are often not accessible to all segments of the youth population, rather just to the privileged few. Simplifying application and reporting procedures may provide easier access for volunteers, especially with the aid of technology. Nevertheless, digitalisation is not necessarily an answer in itself. It can create new barriers, complicating procedures that may prevent some young people from applying. Particular attention should be paid to making sure that websites and online tools are accessible for persons with disabilities. The availability of insurance for certain groups (e.g. persons with disabilities) is limited, and this can discourage them from participating in cross-border solidarity activities. The 2008 Council recommendation made reference to access, particularly for young people with fewer opportunities, and highlighted the exploitation of existing mechanisms and adopting a flexible approach to developing opportunities for cross-border volunteering. These recommendations should be retained in a revised recommendation, but with clearer and more detailed messages.

The specific recommendations of the expert group in relation to this theme are as follow: more opportunities should be provided for young people with fewer opportunities and enhance the range of opportunities for those who cannot afford to go abroad (e.g. through cybervolunteering), youth organisations and other civil society organisations should develop motivational aspects to enable young people with fewer opportunities to become more comfortable with the idea of going abroad. There is a need for the simplification of application and reporting procedures and the promotion of existing European mechanisms that foster youth mobility. National governments should work with insurance providers to make insurance available for all groups of volunteers.

6. Administrative obstacles

Many Member States do not have a dedicated legal framework regulating cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities, and this can lead to a number of administrative obstacles, notably to obtaining visas and residence permits for non-EU nationals. In some cases, it is not possible to obtain a visa or residence permit as cross-border volunteering is not a legal ground for obtaining one. While significant progress has been made in recent years at EU level (notably with Directive (EU) 2016/801), the report found very few developments in this area. Even in Member States where this option does exist, complicated and burdensome administrative procedures may create barriers to participation. The expert group suggests including the relevant EU legislation relating to free movement, the granting of visas and residence permits and mutual recognition within the preamble to the new recommendation. In the expert group's view, this would make the responsible authorities at national level more aware of the relevant EU legislation.

Within this theme, the group recommends that national authorities should provide easier access for participants in cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities to visas and residence permits by simplifying application procedures. Cross-border solidarity activities should be recognised as grounds for applying for a visa or residence permit and administrative procedures (including digitalised procedures) should, be simplified.

7. Awareness

The evidence shows that only a minority of people in the potential target group are aware of opportunities for cross-border volunteering and other solidarity activities. It is important to note that awareness goes beyond information; it is also about the motivation and commitment of young people. Therefore, there is a need to develop people's knowledge of the benefits of volunteering. The need for increased awareness-raising was an important issue in the 2008 recommendation, and it is a challenge that still needs to be addressed. Overall consciousness of quality in cross-border volunteering should be also be raised to enable young people to make informed choices between the many opportunities that exist, as potentially dangerous and poor-quality volunteering opportunities are a growing phenomenon in Europe.

Developing people's knowledge of the benefits of volunteering, traineeships and other cross-border solidarity activities are among the recommendations proposed for this theme. Awareness in the national volunteering sector of the opportunities for international volunteering should be strengthened. Young people's awareness of the importance of intercultural competences, language learning, EU citizenship and solidarity should also be increased. The creation of local contact points to provide information all, including people with disabilities, young volunteers, and youth and civil society/solidarity organisations generally, should be supported. Organisations involved in cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities should receive information and assistance to develop aspects of inclusion and support in their strategies. There should be sufficient information about a voluntary activity, its organisers and the volunteer to enable both parties to make an informed decision about the activity's suitability and meet any legal requirements.

8. Protection

Adequate mechanisms for protecting both participants and those organising the activities are essential, so that problems can be detected before they develop and emergency situations can be dealt with in a timely and concerted manner. Such protection should cover both the physical and the mental well-being of those involved. The experts also emphasised that young people are not provided with support services on their return. Consequently, the report indicates that is particularly important to include the 'return' period in a revised recommendation.

The group recommends that the protection should cover volunteers, staff and other people involved in the implementation of the activities, and the beneficiaries of the activities. Organisations involved in the implementation of cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities should have clear and adequate procedures in place for dealing with crises and emergency situations, and these should be communicated to all. *Force majeure* clauses should ensure that in crisis situations all participants, irrespective of project context and organisational attachment, receive proper attention and care.

9. Social and legal status

The social and legal status of cross-border volunteers is often unclear or not defined at all in legislation, both at home and abroad. This can lead to participants facing barriers to accessing the host Member State's social security system, and social security benefits being lost in their home Member State on return. The concept of 'solidarity jobs and traineeships' does not yet exist in any structured form other than in the framework of the European Solidarity Corps programme.

Provisions governing the right to insurance, compensation for costs incurred while volunteering, taxation of allowances/pocket money and travel refunds are usually included in different legal documents and a unified source of information is lacking. The 2008 Recommendation underlined the need to examine further relevant social protection provisions to make full use of the possibilities under EU and national legislation. Volunteers should also be entitled to social security benefits when they return and should not be penalised for their absence from the country to undertake solidarity activities.

Based on the above, the specific recommendations in relation to this theme include the development of a common understanding of cross-border solidarity activities in relation to existing schemes and the recognition of the legal status of cross-border volunteers at national level. Information on the status of people engaging in cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities should be provided on the Youth Wiki platform. Cross-border volunteers should have access to the host country's healthcare facilities and healthcare professionals.

Processes

10. Digital forms of cross-border volunteering and solidarity

The 2008 Recommendation referred only to the physical mobility of persons in relation to cross-border volunteering. However, new forms of volunteering and cross-border solidarity activities based on IT have since been gathering pace and became an integral part of the overall picture of European solidarity. Digital volunteering or cybervolunteering play a crucial role in recruiting volunteers and delegating and completing voluntary work. During the COVID-19 crisis, digital volunteering has become the major – if not only – mechanism for implementing cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities. However, it is important not to see digital volunteering as just an independent activity; it should also be considered alongside physical mobility. It can be an alternative for physical mobility only in situations where physical mobility is not possible.

The acknowledgement of digital forms of cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities as an opportunity to strengthen cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities is among the recommendations for this theme. They provide an alternative means of including participants who are not in a position to travel physically (e.g. because of severe physical disabilities, mental health difficulties and caring responsibilities). Digital forms of volunteering can be fostered during crises that prevent cross-border mobility and digital forms of cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities can also be used in connection with the physical mobility of volunteers as a means of motivation and preparation. A precise definition of digital cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities should be provided, as well as what it means in the European solidarity context. Funding opportunities for cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities should be extended to cover digital activities.

11. Environmental context

Since the 2008 recommendation was implemented, concern for the environment has grown dramatically, especially among young people. Cross-border activities are a source of greenhouse gas emissions, especially when they involve air transport, and it is therefore important to consider climate impacts when implementing cross-border activities. However, all volunteering

and solidarity projects should incorporate an environmental dimension in their activities and consider how the carbon footprint they leave behind can be reduced as much as possible.

The specific recommendations of the expert group in relation to this theme are as follows: the environmental impact of all actions in a volunteering project should be taken into account (e.g. travel, resource consumption, food consumption), participants should be involved in these reflections to ensure that they develop an awareness of environmental issues; and funds should be available to offset the additional costs of making environmentally friendly choices (e.g. travelling trips of less than 500 km by train rather than by air or by car wherever it is possible). Volunteering projects concerned with the protection of the environment should be given specific attention, as actions to protect the environment and combat climate change can constitute a form of solidarity.

12. Learning

In addition to benefiting communities, participation in cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities also benefits participants. It enables them to acquire essential competences that contribute to their personal and socio-educational development and foster their active participation in society. This way they can improve their employment prospects and strengthen their role as active citizens. This aspect was already acknowledged in the 2008 Council Recommendation, but it needs to be included and further developed in the revised recommendation. It should be noted that learning potential does not necessarily unfold by itself; it needs to be supported before, during and after an activity to take effect.

The expert group proposed the following recommendations within this theme: organisations should consider documenting learning outcomes together with participants before, during and after activities, outcomes should be underpinned by structured preparation, mentoring/supervision and debriefing interventions in order to support learning processes and additional focus should be placed on language learning in view of the transnational context of the activities. In emergency situations, when participants are forced to end their stay abroad through no fault of their own, they should be considered for participation in complementary or further activities that allow them to complete their learning journey.

13. Recognition

Participation has important potential for the learning and personal development of those involved in solidarity activities that are undertaken for the benefit of others and without personal gain. It is important that learning outcomes in this field are made visible, documented and – where feasible – validated and recognised in relation to formal learning trajectories. The 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning underlines the important role that non-formal and informal learning can play in enhancing employability and increasing motivation for lifelong learning, especially for people with few or no qualifications. Therefore, it is essential that non-formal and informal learning receive proper recognition. It can be observed however that validation procedures are still not universally implemented for learning outcomes acquired in a volunteering context. The report provides four forms of recognition of learning outcomes of non-formal/informal learning processes: formal, political, social recognition and self-recognition. Many methods exist for validating and recognising youth work and non-formal learning/education at European and national levels.

The first specific recommendation made by the expert group in relation to this theme is that organisers of cross-border solidarity activities should ensure that participants' learning outcomes are adequately identified, documented and – where feasible – validated, recognised and made visible. Secondly, maximum use should be made of existing European-level tools and processes serving this purpose, e.g. Europass and Youthpass, and the review of the 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

14. Quality assurance

The popularity of cross-border volunteering gave rise to 'voluntourism' (described above). The introduction of fees and a profit motive places an added emphasis on the concept of quality, meaning that it should be clear what activities will be carried out so that young people can make informed choices. This also means that it should be clear how activities will benefit genuine causes based on real local community needs and that participants are not exploited as free labour to the detriment of local employment opportunities. This aspect was only indirectly addressed in the 2008 Council Recommendation. Given the proliferation of opportunities for cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities, it is important that these are transparent to prospective participants and other concerned parties. The development of a European-level 'quality charter' for transnational volunteering and solidarity activities is a complex task that lies outside the scope of the revised recommendation, but this issue should be acknowledged and addressed in more detail than in the 2008 Council recommendation.

In relation to this theme, the report recommends that cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities should be based on a needs analysis to ensure that they support an identifiable need and lead to beneficial outcomes. Organisers should have a clear idea of what they want to achieve by a particular project and develop indicators that can help them determine if the objectives have been met. These indicators should reflect the target group and the circumstances. Projects should be properly evaluated to ascertain their degree of success and identify important lessons that can help improve future activities. In the quest for quality, organisers should draw on existing knowledge and tools and strive for a common understanding of what quality is.

15. Research

Cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities remain an under-researched phenomenon, and the existing research usually covers a national context and is not systematically translated and disseminated across borders. The word 'research; was not mentioned in the 2008 Recommendation, but the text included the need to 'improve the level of knowledge of voluntary activities' and 'exchange information'. Even though there were some progress in this area, there is still an important gap in understanding the phenomenon of cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities. Research therefore needs to be actively encouraged to fill the many gaps in our knowledge and provide the necessary basis for the development of policies and practices.

The specific recommendations of the expert group in relation to this theme are as follows: research should be carried out to ensure that policy priorities and practices are based on solid evidence rather than anecdotal information and activities should be constantly monitored through research carried out on youth indicators. The Commission is uniquely placed to undertake comparative research on the state of cross-border solidarity activities in the EU-27. Priority

should be placed on research that is undertaken in direct contact with practice and with the involvement of practitioners, and in which the results are available within a reasonable time frame (e.g. action research, accompanying research). Research should be carried out on the impact of cross-border solidarity activities, especially longitudinal and tracer studies that can identify outcomes over a longer-term perspective (e.g. impact research, summative evaluations). Finally, research outcomes should be made accessible to all those concerned, including across national borders.

3. ANNEX: Stakeholder consultation synopsis report

3.1 Introduction

This synopsis report aims to provide a summary of the results of the consultation activities on 'youth volunteering' during the period September 2019 until July 2021. It is meant to inform:

- policymakers on the outcome of all consultation activities
- stakeholders on how their input has been taken into account.

3.2 Consultation strategy

The objective of the consultation was to gather citizens' and stakeholders' opinions on obstacles to cross-border volunteering activities. Moreover, the European Commission wanted to collect citizens' views to help identify possible gaps, with a view to developing solutions that could be recommended to Member States and the European Commission in order to tackle these obstacles.

The mapping of stakeholders included young people, volunteering organisations and NGOs with a youth branch, researchers of members of academia, active in the field of volunteering, policy-makers in the field, national agencies in charge of implementing the EU youth programmes (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps) in the EU Member States.

The consultation included two main sources. The first consultation activity was carried out as part of a study on obstacles to solidarity activities and consisted in a survey carried out in October 2019, and a workshop on 11 December 2019. This survey targeted youth organisations and organisations dealing with volunteering activities throughout Europe. The second consultation activity was a public consultation on EU survey, carried out from 28 April to 21 July 2021. The main outcomes of each consultation process are outlined below.

3.3. Survey as part of the study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities

The purpose of the targeted survey of youth and volunteering organisations in the EU in October 2019 was to obtain feedback regarding cross-border solidarity activities, particularly regarding any barriers to participation in solidarity activities.

A total of 660 valid responses were submitted to personalised invitations, together with 36 additional valid responses that came from an open call published on the European Youth Portal.

Out of these 696 total responses, 641 were fully completed questionnaires and 55 were partially completed. The survey questions focussed on obstacles to cross-border volunteering and policy recommendations.

Survey outcome:

Obstacles to cross-border volunteering

Major obstacles:

- **Capacity of organisations**: "There is a lack of stable funding sources for the organisations working in the volunteering field in my country": 79% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

- **Lack of information**: "Information on cross-border volunteering opportunities (abroad) is adequately disseminated in my country": 66% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed whereas 34% agreed or strongly agreed. "

- **Insufficient awareness raising on benefits:** "Enough information is provided to the local communities and the society about the value and the impact of volunteering": 66% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed whereas 34% agreed or strongly agreed.

- **Volunteering perceived as a 'lost year'**: "young people perceive long-term volunteering in another country as a lost year in their employment record": 63% of the organisations surveyed agreed/strongly disagreed, 37% agreed/strongly agreed.

Less important obstacles:

- **Support to volunteers:** "My organisation has enough capacity to adequately support volunteers upon their return from volunteering activities": 82% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed. "My organisation has enough capacity to adequately train and prepare volunteers": 92% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 8% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

- **Quality:** "There are enough organisations in my country capable of implementing good quality cross-border volunteering activities": 72% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

- **Family pressure**: 53% of the respondents found the statement "How relevant are the following obstacles to volunteering in your country or abroad?: There is family pressure for young people not to go volunteering in other countries because of their caring duties and responsibilities" not very relevant or not at all relevant whereas 46% of the respondents found it very relevant or fairly relevant.

- **Job substitution:** Volunteers used as underpaid substitutes for paid staff. "Volunteers are often used as underpaid substitutes for regular staff or unpaid traineeships in my country": 58% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed and 42% agreed or strongly agreed.

- **Lack of foreign languages skills**: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the capacities of your organisation and other organisations in your country to implement volunteering activities: The foreign language skills of young people going to volunteer in other countries / volunteers coming to my country are sufficient": 64% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

- **Recognition of competences and skills acquired**: "Employers in my country recognise the competences developed during the volunteering experience of young people as relevant to the labour market": 59% of the respondents to the survey of organisations agreed/strongly agreed, 41% agreed/strongly disagreed.
    - "Volunteers receive some kind of formal recognition for their participation in volunteering activities": 88% of the organisations surveyed agreed/strongly agreed, 12% agreed/strongly disagreed.

- **Legal framework**: "There is no clear legal framework defining volunteering field in my country": 43% responded very/fairly relevant, 57% not very relevant or not at all relevant.

- **Health insurance and welfare payments**: "Young people lose their **national health insurance** if they leave to volunteer long-term abroad": 71% responded: not very/not at all relevant, 29% very or fairly relevant. "Young people receiving **state welfare payments** (unemployment benefits, disability pay, etc.) might lose them if they become volunteers": 56% responded not very relevant or not at all relevant, 44% responded very/fairly relevant.

- **Visas and residence permits**: "Volunteering does not give legal grounds for obtaining a visa in my country": 73% responded not very relevant or not at all relevant, 27% responded very/fairly relevant. "Volunteering does not give legal grounds for obtaining a residence permit in my country": 65% responded not very relevant or not at all relevant, 34% responded very/fairly relevant.

Policy recommendations

- **EU common volunteering definition**: "The European Union should aim to have a common definition of volunteering across the Member States": 95% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

- **EU legal alignment**: "EU Member States should collaborate more closely to align legal rules and regulations governing the volunteering field": 95% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed whereas 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

3.4. Focus Group as part of the study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities

A dedicated workshop with 16 public and private-sector experts took place on 11 December 2019 in Brussels. The experts identified the recognition of the value of volunteering, the legal frameworks for volunteering, entitlements and benefits (portability), access to and promotion of the European Solidarity Corps and organisational capacity as the five most pressing obstacles to cross-border volunteering. These identified five obstacles served as a basis for the EU survey for the Open Public Consultation.

3.5. Feedback on "Have your Say" website

Three individual feedbacks on the initiative were submitted on the "Have your Say" website in February and March 2021. They concerned the possible exploitation of volunteers through job substitution, cross-border volunteers facing problems in obtaining access to the European Health Insurance Card (coverage for a short time, 2-3 months only, or need to be employed) and not receiving the same access to EHIC as Erasmus+ university students. Another respondent spoke out in favour of facilitating volunteering of the young who are very poor, as well as projects with these young people and project in the field of the environment and the energy transition. Most of these points have been addressed by the proposed recommendation.

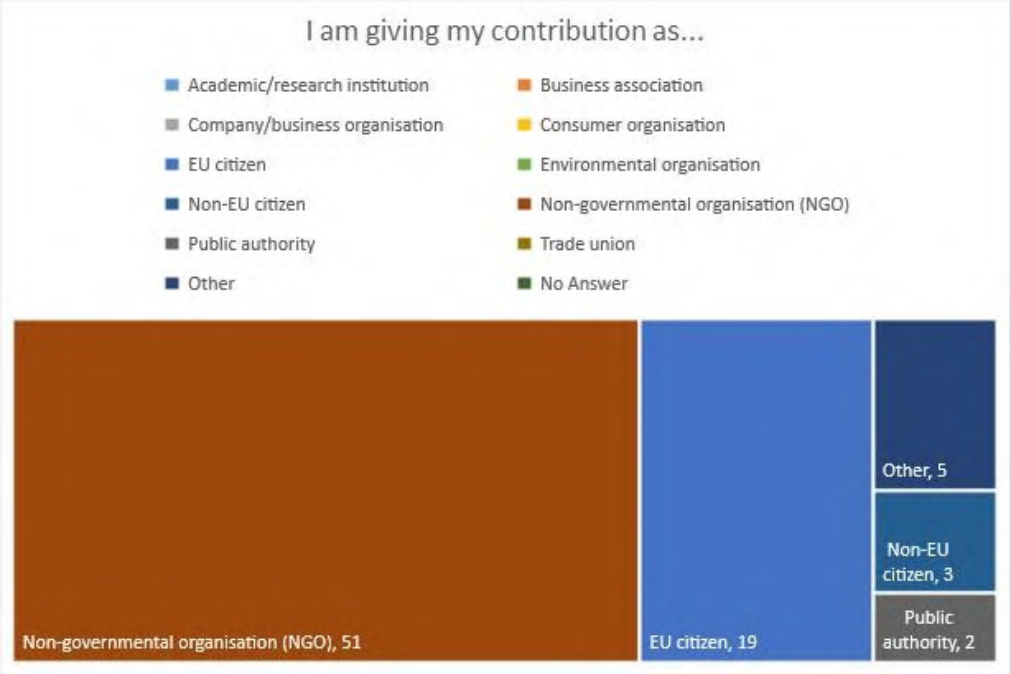
3.6. Open public consultation

The open public consultation (OPC) was published on the Commission's "Have your say" portal and ran from 28 April to 21 July 2021. The goal was to collect opinions of young people, volunteering organisations and NGOs, youth organisations or NGOs with a youth branch, NGOs active in the humanitarian aid field, businesses and enterprises, researchers or members of academia active in the fields of mobility, volunteering and solidarity, and policy-makers at different territorial levels.

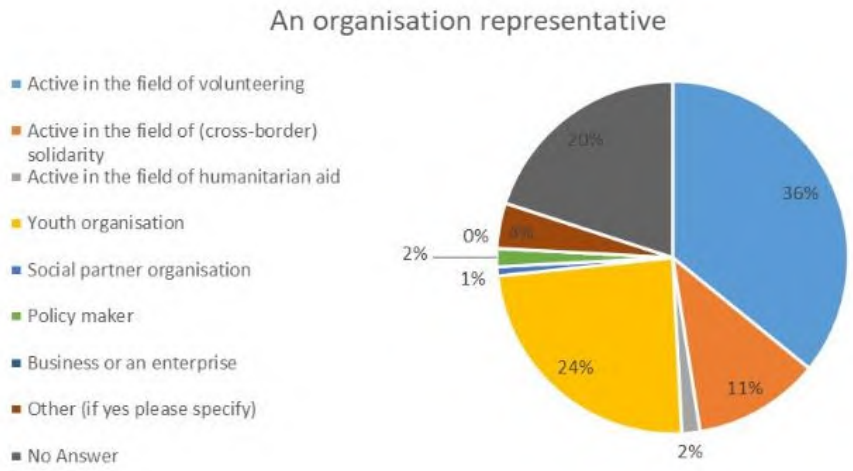
The OPC registered a total of 80 replies. Over 60% of the respondents were NGOs, and almost half of the respondents were organisations representatives active in the field of volunteering. A factual report on the outcome of the open public consultation has been published[6].

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12774-Youth-volunteering-working-on-projects-in-other-EU-countries-update-/public-consultation_en

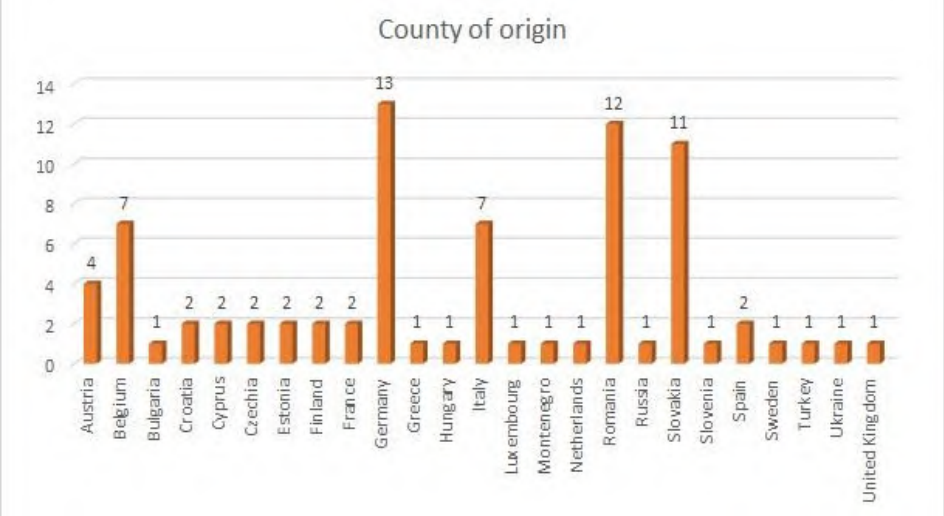
Statement "I am giving my contributions as…"



Type of organisation representative



Country of origin of respondents



In addition (and outside of the "Have your say" website), the Commission received four position papers during or shortly after the consultation period: three from NGOs, and one from a Member State.

The position paper from a Member State called for synergies between the various civic and volunteering programmes of Member States, as well as between national and European mobility and volunteering schemes. Furthermore, access to volunteering should be simplified and financial and administrative structures of the respective organisations strengthened. The position paper pointed to the importance of information networks such as Eurodesk for awareness-raising on volunteering projects, social security cover for young volunteers, research into the impact of the mobility on social inclusion of the young and in society. The validation and recognition of acquired competences should be strengthened. Generally speaking, this Member State pleaded for paying more attention to the situation of the disabled and to the young Europeans in the EU's outermost regions, as otherwise they would not have access to the programmes. Digital volunteering could be promoted, but rather in support of physical mobility and not as a substitute of it. The environmental impact should be taken into consideration when designing projects involving mobility. The reference to the Youth Pass could be strengthened and a mobile-friendly version developed, as well as competence self-evaluation tools for the young volunteers. The importance of the mobility of young youth workers was highlighted as well. Finally, the extra-EU dimension of youth volunteering, linked to the integration of the humanitarian aid strand in the ESC, should be considered as well.

A non-governmental organisation taking part in the ESC submitted its views and proposals on how to improve the administrative procedures of the ESC. Another non-governmental organisation active in the field of learning mobility of pupils and volunteers listed as main challenges the lack of sufficient awareness of the ESC and other cross-border volunteering schemes on the side of the authorities, problems with the provision and portability of entitlements and benefits to volunteers, and difficulties in obtaining visa and residence permits for volunteers. The organisation recommended to enable young people from third countries to volunteer in EU Member States and to tackle the problem of visas and residence permits for these people. Links between ESC accredited organisations and services related to social inclusion would support the engagement of socially disadvantaged groups. Blended learning for cross-border volunteers would enable volunteers to contribute to volunteering in a remote way. Involvement in the activities of organisers of solidarity activities should also be considered volunteering, even if not directly with people in need.

A third non-governmental organisation active in the welfare field submitted recommendations on the strengthening of the inclusion aspect for Erasmus+ and ESC programmes. These included involving people with fewer opportunities and special needs as experts in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the programmes; directly addressing target groups experiencing disadvantages and discrimination with structured information; using accessible programme documents; applying flexible rules in the support of additional expenses for participants with fewer opportunities; raising awareness among evaluators and decision-makers about the special needs of disadvantaged target groups; funding of supporting structures for interested volunteers; the equal application of the rules across all programme countries and all national agencies should be ensured and ensuring target group-specific support for language learning.

The broad topics of these individual submissions are all covered in the proposed recommendation.

3.6.1. Analysis of replies on the basis of the different stakeholder categories and per consultation topic

Two main stakeholder categories participated in the open public consultation:

- 51 non-governmental organisations (NGOs): active in the field of volunteering, (cross-border) solidarity or as a youth organisation / scholarship-giving NGO of careleavers who want to experience international exchange / European network to foster international cooperation in the field of youth information/culture/disability
- 18 EU citizens with previous volunteering experience, or currently volunteering

On the **competences that volunteering should provide**, NGOs and EU citizens agreed on the three most important ones: respect for diversity and tolerance of other points of view, interpersonal skills and team work, and the ability to cooperate and leadership. NGOs gave more importance to problem-solving and decision-making, critical thinking and skills related to

societal challenges than the EU former or current volunteers. The EU former or current volunteers gave more weight to linguistic proficiency and skills related to employment than the NGOs.

In the **obstacles to volunteering** part, the NGOs and the EU former and current volunteers agreed on the following three most important issues under the heading of "**awareness":** 1) lack of information/awareness regarding the opportunities provided through volunteering abroad, 2) lack of information / recognition of the value of volunteering, and 3) lack of cooperation and awareness between youth and other sectors/institutions. EU former or current volunteers gave more weight to the problem of skills and competences developed during volunteering not being recognized by employers as relevant to the labour market, whereas NGOs gave more weight than the citizens to the problem of lack of preparation of such activities at earlier stages of education/social interaction activities.

As regards **obstacles related to COVID 19 and other impairments to mobility related to calamities**, the NGOs and the EU former or current volunteers agreed on the most important obstacle, namely travel restrictions or even interdictions, which lead to closed borders in an emergency situation or repatriation difficulties. NGOs gave more weight than the former or current EU volunteers to the lack of support measures for organisations active in the fields of volunteering and solidarity and the lack of detailed action/contingency/repatriation plans regarding the health and safety of young people volunteering on a project abroad. EU former or current volunteers were more worried than NGOs about the lack of recognition of the benefits of online volunteering.

As regards **structural/societal obstacles**, the biggest problems for former or current volunteers were financial obstacles and the volunteering experience of young people and its impact generally not being valued by society, due to the absence of a volunteering tradition. The latter was also the issue most highlighted by NGOs, followed by the financial obstacles. The third most important problem, shared by both stakeholder groups, was caring duties and responsibilities preventing young people to go for volunteering in other countries. A third of the former or current volunteer respondents mentioned the fear of becoming unemployed after a volunteering mobility.

With a view to **administrative and legal obstacles**, the top concern for the NGO side was the requirement for visas and residence permits for volunteers from third countries. The top concern for former or current EU volunteers was the absence or fragmentation of legal frameworks for volunteering (top 3 concern for NGOs), the fact that no volunteering law specifically for youth exists, and the loss of state welfare payments for youth (top 2 concern for NGOs).

As regards the topic of **obstacles related to the European Solidarity Corps** (ESC), NGOs pointed mostly to the administrative burden when applying to the ESC, followed by the low number of measures for capacity building and support and the low number of organizations having the capacity to take part in the ESC. The former or current EU volunteers thought that none of the answers were relevant, but also pointed to lack of promotion and outreach of the ESC, lack of a strong ESC brand and the low number of measures for capacity-building and support.

In terms of **obstacles related to cooperation between the EU and Member States**, the NGOs listed the lack of complementarity between European and national volunteering schemes, as well as of sufficient information on administrative procedures. The former or current EU volunteers did not have strong views on any reply. The replies mentioned most were lack of complementarity between European and national volunteering schemes, lack of common understanding of what volunteering is, and lack of sufficient information on administrative procedures – or thought that none of the replies was relevant.

The NGOs left most of the comments in the **open text box on "other obstacles**", focussing on the issue of funding, low interest to volunteer from young EU residents, the IT infrastructure, inclusiveness of disadvantaged youth, the quality of the projects, which are often not interesting for qualified young people, lack of/non-transferability of services for the disabled when living abroad, lack of accessibility of information on websites and tools for users with disabilities, and long processing times. Only three former or current EU volunteers left comments, focussing on the wish to make volunteering projects accessible to minors, mobility obstacles for people from outermost regions and problems with visa and health insurance, and the administrative burden of the ESC and losing the well-built EVS brand.

NGOs and former and current EU volunteers put different priorities when it came to **actions for EU and Member States to focus on in the future**. For the NGOs, the most important actions were:

1) support the creation of local contact and information points to raise children and young people's awareness on a) benefits of volunteering, b) the role volunteering plays in solidarity, and c) to promote its impact and the benefits for communities
2) make available opportunities to properly assess, validate and certify the skills that people gain through volunteering or other solidarity activities across the Member States, so that they can be recognized, for instance by employers and in the education system
3) improve the attractiveness of the European Solidarity Corps programme including by improving the awareness and outreach to children and young people and by raising awareness on the importance of volunteering activities, which relate directly to solidarity
4) increase the inclusiveness of young people with fewer opportunities in cross-border solidarity activities; act to simplify administrative procedures to access cross-solidarity activities
5) Improve targeted acquisition, recognition and validation of transversal skills to employment and other societal challenges (e.g. climate crisis and the green transition) to tackle skills gap and skills mismatch.

For the former or current EU volunteers, the most important actions were:

1) make available opportunities to properly assess, validate and certify the skills that people gain through volunteering and other solidarity activities across the Member

states, so that they can be recognized, for instance by employers and in the education system
2) improve (or create) quality standards for volunteering
3) improve targeted acquisition, recognition and validation of transversal skills relating to employment and other societal challenges (e.g. climate crisis and the green transition) to tackle skills gap and skills mismatch; increase the inclusiveness of young people with fewer opportunities in cross-border solidarity activities
4) create more synergies and facilitate complementarity between the European and Member States' solidarity, volunteering, civic service and mobility schemes for young people; act to simplify administrative procedures to access cross-border solidarity activities
5) promote more linguistic support – foreign language training.

The NGOs also left many comments in the **open text field on 'any field that future actions should focus on to promote the mobility of young people who want to undertake cross-border solidarity activities**'. These ranged from ideas such as a "Nobel Prize" for the best volunteer and creating a volunteering programme also for children, extraordinary cost coverage and more stable funding, training of regional multipliers, promoting green policies in volunteering, recognition of soft skills and awareness-raising of cross-border volunteering programmes, to solving the visa problem for third country nationals and an EU initiative to create affordable housing for mobility.

One former or current EU volunteer left the comment that minors should be given access to volunteering projects, and schools should be actively involved to inform about the possibilities. Three non-EU citizens suggested to make opportunities for people from third country partner countries, to have better tools in place to learn a language, to forbid organisations to host volunteers without providing accommodation, and to make sure that the organisations are really read to host volunteers.

In conclusion, one main concern of the former or current EU volunteers is the wish to have their **learning outcomes properly assessed, validated and certified**, so that they can be recognized by employers or in the educational system. Linked to this, a significant number of the responding former or current volunteers also mentioned the fear of becoming unemployed after a volunteering mobility. They would also like to see **quality standards** for volunteering and **increase the inclusiveness of young people with fewer opportunities**. The proposed policy lines of the recommendation foresee to raise awareness of the existing frameworks for identification, documentation and validation of learning outcomes of volunteering activities, as well as supporting organisers of volunteering activities in a more systematic and generalized use of existing national or EU frameworks for this purpose. Furthermore, they foresee measures to ensure that organisers of volunteering activities deliver on high quality and socially inclusive volunteering opportunities.

NGOs also supported opportunities to **assess, validate and certify the skills gained** and to **increase the inclusiveness of disadvantaged young people**. They felt that it was of prime importance to **raise awareness on the benefits of volunteering**, which the proposal for a recommendation also tackles. In the obstacles part, the NGOs focussed (more than the EU

volunteers) on the problem of **lack of preparation of volunteering activities, the lack of support measures for organisations and the lack of detailed action/contingency/repatriation plans regarding the health and safety of young volunteers**. NGOs were also concerned about the **access to the volunteering projects, and the legal conditions**: visa and residence permit requirements for third country volunteers, fragmented legal frameworks for volunteering and the potential loss of state welfare payments for youth. Whilst the EU volunteers held no strong views on the **interplay of European and national volunteering schemes**, this was a problem for the NGOs. The proposed recommendation addresses all of these points.