European Parliament

EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives

European Solidarity Corps

Culture and Education

EN

RESEARCH FOR CULT COMMITTEE

EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives

European Solidarity Corps

Abstract

This study analyses the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027. It covers the early implementation of the programme and provides a description of barriers identified. The main finding is that the implementation of ESC programme has been deemed fairly successful overall, although a number of challenges need to be addressed. The study concludes with a set of recommendations.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CULT	Committee on Culture and Education
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission)
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EEA	European Economic Area
EP	European Parliament
ESC	European Solidarity Corps
EU	European Union
EVS	European Voluntary Service
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NA	National Agency
OLS	Online Language Support
TEC	Training and Evaluation Cycle

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme aims to bring together young people to build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding to societal and humanitarian challenges. The main target group of the ESC programme is young people aged 18-30, or, in the case of humanitarian activities, up to 35 years of age.

The European Solidarity Corps is divided into two strands – solidarity strand and humanitarian aid strand. The solidarity strand of the programme supports volunteering, solidarity projects, networking activities, and quality and support measures. Humanitarian aid projects can involve individuals volunteering for two to 12 months.

In order to ensure that the organisations participating in the ESC are of the highest standard, a Quality Label has been introduced. The Quality Label affirms that an organisation is legitimate and is able and willing to carry out high-quality, solidarity activities that are in line with the principles, objectives and quality standards of the ESC.

The policy aspects of implementation are the responsibility of the Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). The practical aspects of implementation are handled by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). However, a large part of this activity is devolved to national agencies.

This study concludes that overall the implementation of the programme is achieving its objectives, and that the content of the programme is of high value, particularly the solidarity aspect. While a communication strategy has been developed, there is a need to increase further the awareness-raising and 'brand-building' activities at European and national levels. This is to ensure the buy-in of public authorities, civil societies, organisations, and participants, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Regarding the solidarity aspect, several national agencies stressed that the programme's budget was insufficient since it did not allow new organisations and individuals to effectively participate in the programme.

Since the ESC was separated from the Erasmus+ programme, stakeholders have the impression that there has been an increase in administrative requirements. This has resulted in greater administrative burden for national agencies and organisations involved in ESC projects. Additionally, stakeholders have reported issues with the IT tools, including frequent system errors.

Another challenge is related to the budget. Some organisations cannot afford to work with volunteers and have had to give up on some projects due to the low budget coupled with inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. Stakeholders have suggested that the budget should increase annually to accommodate new organisations that wish to implement projects each year.

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 1: Increase the visibility and brand of the programme. The European Commission as well as national agencies should prioritise communication and awareness-raising efforts for the ESC programme, as it is currently not widely known to the public. To ensure effective campaigns, the EC and NAs should collaborate with the ESC projects to raise awareness by promoting success stories and testimonials. This should be accompanied by a high-level campaign to increase the programme's visibility within European and national structures. Good practices should be promoted at the European and national level. Establishing a common branding strategy would facilitate the recognisability. Strengthening the prestige of the Quality Label would not only increase the visibility of the ESC but also contribute to its greater credibility.

However, if the communication activities are successful and more organisations end up applying, it would result in an even lower success rate for projects within the current limited budget leaving many organisations and young people discouraged. For this reason, increase of communication, promotional and awareness-raising activities needs to be accompanied with an increase in the budget of the ESC in order to be able to offer opportunities to potential new applicants. (see also Recommendation 2 below)

Recommendation 2: Ensure a sufficient budget as a prerequisite for guaranteeing that the programme is accessible to persons from all socioeconomic backgrounds. As emphasised by the stakeholder consultation, the ESC requires a continuous increase of its budget. Furthermore, the flat rate and lump sum features need to reflect the latest developments in the economy of the EU-27, including rising inflation. This ensures that the participants are able to cover their basic expenses and decent living standards, while preventing the participation within the programme becoming exclusive to persons from more well-off backgrounds. The budget ceiling for the individual projects, in terms of administrative and resource costs, should be increased.

Recommendation 3: Reduce the administrative burden to adjust to the programme target groups. The processes should be continuously improved in order to reduce the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries. The administrative processes should be better tailored to the target groups of the programme, for whom the ESC is likely their first encounter with an EU-funded programme. Additional support (for example, in the form of training and video tutorials) should be provided to organisations, particularly those that focus on providing opportunities for participants from vulnerable backgrounds (see also Recommendation 4 below).

Recommendation 4: Continue to enhance inclusion measures. The ESC, in general, should strive for the greater inclusivity of participants from vulnerable backgrounds as well as providing greater support to organisations that focus their activities on these target groups. The opportunities the programme can provide for young people coming from disadvantaged situations should be promoted and made more visible. In order to enhance the inclusion measures, good practices among organisations should be collected and exchanged at the European and the national level.

A greater inclusion of third country participants should be considered, for example, through establishing a specific ESC visa category. Creating an ESC-specific visa category could simplify this process. The provision of financial and legal support connected to visa procedures should be included among the support offered under the ESC. Furthermore, the role of sending organisations should be clarified further.

An expansion of the age limits to include younger and older volunteers than the current 18-30 age group could facilitate greater participation.

Recommendation 5: Improve the IT and functioning of the online platform. The IT environment accompanying the ESC is deemed as highly volatile and not fit for the purpose and aims of the programme. Further investment into the user-friendliness of the online platform should be made in order to continue increasing the number of participants and funded projects. Training opportunities complemented by instructional videos on how to use the tools should be developed to support the usability of the online platform and the IT tools.

It would be advantageous to create a centralised platform where grant holders can upload contract amendments. Currently, this can only be done by emailing the NAs, which often leads to delays in the implementation of the projects.

Recommendation 6: Consider establishing a programme committee. A programme committee similar to the one that exists for Erasmus+ should be established. As a result of creating such a

committee, political awareness of the programme and its importance to the integration of youth into the society would be strengthened, which may in turn lead to increased awareness-raising efforts at the European and national levels.

Recommendation 7: Improve visibility of the portfolio of funded projects. The European Commission should increase the transparency, searchability and findability of the funding and tender opportunities portal (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area, SEDIA) where ESC calls and funded projects are published to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse project data per programme. In its current format, very limited analysis can be carried out on Commission programme implementation, which limits the transparency of allocated funding.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study constitutes an analysis of the European Solidarity Corps programme. It has been produced as part of the research project on the "EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives: European Solidarity Corps".

This document is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides a descriptive overview of the European Solidarity Corps programme design and background;
- Section 3 is focused on the early implementation of the ESC programme elements, including a description of some of the barriers identified;
- Section 4 discussed repercussions of external factors that are affecting the ESC;
- Section 5 provides an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme strands;
- Section 6 presents recommendations for further improvements to the European Solidarity Corps.

The full findings of the survey[1] carried out for the research project can be found appended to this report, along with an anonymised list of stakeholders interviewed.

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[1] The survey targeted national agencies and wider stakeholders including ESC beneficiaries. A total of 86 responses were received.

2. PROGRAMME BACKGROUND

KEY FINDINGS

- The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme is a relatively new programme, which has been introduced in three phases. The pilot phase was launched in 2016. The current ESC programme, 2021-2027, constitutes the third phase of the programme.

- The overarching aim of the European Solidarity Corps is to boost the involvement of young people and organisations in solidarity activities, particularly volunteering. The ESC has a specific objective of providing young people, including those who are comparatively disadvantaged, with easily accessible opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities.

- The programme also has transversal priorities: inclusion and diversity, participation in democratic life and digital transformation. In 2022 and 2023, environmental protection, sustainable development and climate action were added as priorities.

- The European Solidarity Corps is divided into two strands – the solidarity strand and the humanitarian aid strand. The solidarity strand of the programme supports volunteering, solidarity projects, networking activities, and quality and support measures. Humanitarian aid projects can involve individuals volunteering for two to 12 months.

2.1. Background and objectives

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme aims to "bring together young people to build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding to societal and humanitarian challenges"[2]. It also aims to offer "an inspiring and empowering experience for young people who want to help, learn and develop and provides a single-entry point for such solidarity activities throughout the Union and beyond"[3]. The main target group of the ESC are young people aged 18-30 or, in the case of humanitarian activities, young adults up to 35 years of age.

The idea of the European Solidarity Corps was first mentioned in 2016 by the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union address to the European Parliament[4]. Three months later, on 7 December 2016, a Commission Communication[5] established a pilot initiative on the European Solidarity Corps. The goal was for the ESC to engage at least 100,000 participants by 2020.

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[2] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide; https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf

[3] Ibidem.

[4] European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, Juncker, J., *State of the Union 2016 –* , Publications Office of the European Union, 2016, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/968989

[5] European Commission (2016), Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions A European Solidarity Corps. Available at : https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0942

At the time, the initiative was divided into two strands – volunteering and occupational. The volunteering strand was foreseen to expand the European Voluntary Service scheme while the occupational strand, the smaller of the strands, aimed to provide opportunities to youth for a job, traineeship or apprenticeship in sectors connected to solidarity.[6]

The Communication also established that the ESC would be rolled out in three phases. The first phase started with the ESC's establishment in 2016 and used existing financing programmes and resources[7] to support the placements under the ESC. This first phase lasted until 2018. Due to criticism of its lack of a dedicated funding line, including an EP resolution of 6 April 2017[8], the second phase of the ESC had its own budget line assigned through a legal basis.

The second phase of the Corps has existed since 2018, when a three-year programme was agreed[9] "with a view to creating opportunities for young people across the Union to make a meaningful contribution to society, show solidarity and develop their skills, enabling them to obtain not only work experience but also an invaluable human experience"[10]. During that period, more than 450,000 young people expressed an interest in taking part and more than 56,000 were able to take up opportunities[11].

The current third phase, the programme for 2021-2027, has a broader scope given that it incorporates two other initiatives. One is the European Voluntary Service, which was part of the Erasmus+ programme under the previous programming period and is a learning mobility programme[12]. It has been subsumed into the solidarity strand. The other former initiative that is now part of the European Solidarity Corps programme is the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative[13], which supported humanitarian aid projects and deployed nearly 1,200 volunteers between 2014 and 2020[14]. This initiative has become a specific humanitarian aid strand in the new programme.

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[6] Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions A European Solidarity Corps, COM/2016/0942 final. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1481272643295&uri=COM:2016:942:FIN

[7] Erasmus +; Employment and Social innovation Programme; LIFE Programme; Europe for Citizens Programme; Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund; European Regional Development Fund; European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development; Health Programme

[8] European Parliament resolution of 6 April 2017 on the European Solidarity Corps (2017/2629(RSP))

[9] Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme; https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/888/

[10] Recital 7 of Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme; op.cit.

[11] European Commission. European Solidarity Corps – Performance. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-overview/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en

[12] Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. Available at:
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0050:0073:EN:PDF#:~:text=1.,2014%20to%2031%20December%202020

[13] Regulation (EU) No 375/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 establishing the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps ('EU Aid Volunteers initiative'). Available at:
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32014R0375

[14] European Commission. European Solidarity Corps – Performance. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-overview/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en

According to the European Commission, having a single structure makes it possible to exploit the strengths of the predecessor programmes in a synergic manner and eliminates confusion from having three similar initiatives[15].

The overarching aim of the European Solidarity Corps is to boost the involvement of young people and organisations in solidarity activities, particularly volunteering. This initiative seeks to "strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond, addressing societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with a particular focus on the promotion of sustainable development, social inclusion and equal opportunities"[16].

The ESC also has a specific objective of providing young people, including those who are comparatively disadvantaged, with "easily accessible opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities that induce positive societal changes in the EU and beyond"[17]. In return, the programme continues to improve and validate the competences of the participants, while also facilitating their engagement as active citizens.

A schematic representation of the structure of the programme is found below.

Figure 1: Structure of the European Solidarity Corps programme

Domain	Youth
Programme	**European Solidarity Corps**
	Strands - **Participation of young people in solidarity activities** - Volunteering Projects - Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas - Solidarity Projects - **Participation of young people in humanitarian aid related solidarity activities** - Volunteering under the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps
Management Mode	**Direct**: Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), DG EAC
	Indirect (2021 situation) - **Programme countries**: Member States of the European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Republic of North Macedonia, Turkey - **Partner countries**: Norway and other countries neighbouring the EU

Source: European Solidarity Corps - Performance webpage

The programme also has transversal priorities[18]: inclusion and diversity, participation in democratic life, and digital transformation. In 2021, prevention, promotion and support in the field of health was a

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[15] European Commission. European Solidarity Corps – Performance. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-overview/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en

[16] Committee on Culture and Education (2023). Draft Report on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CULT-PR-751652_EN.pdf

[17] European Commission. European Solidarity Corps – Performance. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en#programme-in-a-nutshell

[18] Three of these priorities have been unchanged in 2021-2023. European Solidarity Corps Programme Guides 2021, 2022, 2023; http://europa.eu/youth/sites/default/files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2021.pdf; https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2022.pdf; https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf

priority, reflecting the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022 and 2023, this focus was replaced by environmental protection, sustainable development and climate action. This shift is in line with the EP Resolution of 15 September 2020[19] that, among its recommendations, highlights the importance of giving more visibility and funding to tackle environmental issues.

The programme supports EU youth policy, notably the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027[20]. At the same time, it is aligned with the policy framework for volunteering that was first presented in the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union[21] in 2008. In 2022, this was updated by a new Recommendation, which points to the success of the European Solidarity Corps and the predecessor programmes, while calling on Member States to eliminate a series of barriers to transnational volunteering in areas such as social security and the accessibility of information. It also places a strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion, as volunteering may be the only mobility opportunity for those from disadvantaged and/or vulnerable backgrounds[22].

The countries participating in the European Solidarity Corps are the EU-27, Iceland and Liechtenstein (two EFTA countries which are part of the EEA), North Macedonia and Turkey. Organisations from these countries can lead a project. Volunteers and project partner organisations can come from any of these countries as well as from Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, Palestine, Serbia, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine[23].

2.1.1.   ESC strands

The European Solidarity Corps is divided into two strands – the solidarity strand and the humanitarian aid strand. The solidarity strand of the programme supports volunteering, solidarity projects, networking activities, and quality and support measures. Two types of volunteering are supported: volunteering projects and volunteering teams in high priority areas.

In volunteering projects, participating organisations provide individual young people or teams of young people with the opportunity to volunteer in their own country or in another country for up to 12 months. The volunteers' board, lodging and local travel are paid for, they receive pocket money from the project[24] and their travel costs are met. Participating organisations receive funding to meet management costs and, if appropriate, for language training of volunteers and inclusion support for young people who have fewer opportunities[25].

Projects to provide volunteering teams in high priority areas can receive up to EUR 400,000. They must involve participants from at least two countries, who will work on short-term projects in areas of particular need. The participating organisations receive support towards organisational costs,

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[19] European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2020 on effective measures to 'green' Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps (2019/2195(INI))

[20] Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42018Y1218%2801%29

[21] Council Recommendation of 20 November 2008 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:319:0008:0010:EN:PDF

[22] Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2022.157.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2022%3A157%3AFULL

[23] Cooperation with the Russian Federation, which was originally on this list, was terminated in April 2022. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_2391

[24] EUR 4 to 7 per day depending on the country.

[25] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf

including the board and lodging of the volunteers, travel and pocket money for the volunteers and, where appropriate, inclusion support.

The priorities are defined each year and they are often linked with challenges faced by the EU. For instance, in 2022, the priorities included healthy lifestyles, brought on by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic[26], while in 2023, the priorities are relief and assistance for those fleeing armed conflicts and victims of natural or manmade disasters and prevention, as well as promotion and support in the field of health, particularly support for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing health-related challenges[27].

Solidarity projects are non-profit solidarity activities initiated, developed and implemented by young people themselves for a period of two to 12 months. They involve groups of at least five young people. They should address key challenges within their communities (including any identified jointly in border regions) and should be a non-formal learning experience. The funding covers project management costs, the cost of a coach and inclusion support of those with fewer opportunities[28].

The table underneath summarises the aims and expected outcomes of the volunteering and solidarity projects respectively.

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[26] European Commission (2022). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide 2022. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2022.pdf
[27] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide 2023. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf
[28] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide 2023. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf

Table 1: ESC aims and expected outcomes for volunteering and solidarity projects

Volunteering projects[29]		Solidarity projects
Aim	• address clearly defined unmet societal challenges; • promote solidarity across Member States; • enable the young volunteer(s) to gain skills and competences which are useful for their personal, educational, social and professional development; • provide tangible benefits to the communities where the activities are carried out; • ensure a direct contact between the participant and the beneficiaries of the solidarity-related activities, to enable the young volunteer to gain skills that are useful for their educational and social development; • reach out to young people with fewer opportunities, including refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; • promote diversity, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue – and the EU values of human dignity, freedom, equality and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities – as well as projects enhancing media literacy, critical thinking and a sense of initiative among young people; • reinforce the capacities and international scope of the participating organisations; • raise participants' awareness and understanding of other cultures and countries, … to build networks of international contacts, to actively participate in society and to develop a sense of European citizenship and identity.	• provide young people with easily accessible opportunities to engage in solidarity-related activities; • foster active participation and social commitment by young people carrying out the project; • help address concrete, unmet societal challenges and strengthen communities; • help enhance the personal, educational, social and civic development of young people; • have an impact on the local community by addressing local issues or common challenges and developing local opportunities, particularly in communities located in rural, isolated or marginalised areas and border regions; • promote environmentally sustainable and responsible behaviour among young people implementing the project and other participants in project activities, raising their awareness of the importance of acting to reduce or compensate for the environmental footprint of activities.
Expected outcome	• improved skills and competences for personal, educational, social, civic, cultural and professional development; • more active participation in democratic life and in society in general; • enhanced employability and transition to the labour market; • increased sense of initiative and social entrepreneurship; • increased self-empowerment and self-esteem; • improved foreign language competences; • enhanced intercultural awareness; • better awareness of the European project, history, functioning and EU values; • increased motivation for further engagement in the solidarity sector; • increased awareness of humanitarian aid-related themes and values.	• increased capacity to operate at EU/international level; • innovative and improved ways of operating towards their target groups; • greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic and cultural diversity; • more modern, dynamic, committed and professional environment inside the organisations.

Source: own elaboration on ESC work programmes[30]

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[29] Individual volunteering and/or activities by volunteering teams

[30] The wording is taken from the 2021 Work Programme and is identical in the 2022 and 2023 Work Programmes, e.g., for 2022: 2022 annual work programme for the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/c2021_7860_of_08_11_2021.pdf

Under the humanitarian aid strand, humanitarian aid projects can involve individuals volunteering for two to 12 months (as part of projects with at least 15 volunteers) or teams of between five and 40 people from at least two participating countries lasting two weeks to two months. The maximum EU grant is EUR 650,000 and meets similar costs to those of the other projects. Projects are expected to prioritise inclusion and diversity, environmental protection, sustainable development and climate action, and digital transformation in their approach. Funding under the humanitarian aid strand has been available since 2022.

There are provisions in both strands to prevent young people from being exploited as cheap labour. In the case of the solidarity strand, volunteering must include a learning and training component, cannot be a substitute for traineeships or jobs or equated with employment, and must be based on a written volunteering agreement. The humanitarian aid strand contains similar provisions, with the addition of the possibility of development and capacity-building components involving highly skilled, highly trained and experienced coaches, mentors and experts.

2.1.2. Quality Label

Organisations participating in the ESC must obtain a Quality Label in order to participate in the programme. The Quality Label affirms that an organisation is legitimate and is able and willing to carry out high-quality solidarity activities that are in line with the principles, objectives, and quality standards of the ESC[31]. The label is obtained via national agencies[32].

There are two types of Quality Labels, depending on the role of the organisation in an ESC project: the host role or the support role. Applicant organisations can either be lead organisations or supporting organisations. Supporting organisations do not have to provide information on their activities. Lead organisations must provide information on their longer-term objectives and targets, expected benefits and their approach to project management. They must submit an activity plan covering at least three years.

All organisations must agree to comply with the following principles[33]:

- Equal opportunities and non-discrimination
- Avoidance of job substitution
- Avoidance of harmful activities
- Provision of high-quality, easily accessible and inclusive activities
- Adequate training and volunteering arrangements
- Not making a profit

The EP Resolution of 15 September 2020[34] called on the European Commission to include sound environmental practices among the principles. While this has not yet been reflected among the Quality Label principles, promotion and incorporation of environmental sustainability and responsibility is listed among the award criteria for lead organisations on which the applications are assessed[35].

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[31] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf
[32] SALTO-Youth for non-participating countries. European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf
[33] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. P. 38. Available at
: https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf
[34] European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2020 on effective measures to 'green' Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps (2019/2195(INI)), Article 34.
[35] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. P. 42. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf

A Quality Label is awarded for the whole duration of the programming period rather than being tied to a specific project, provided that compliance with the requirements is maintained. Applications can be submitted at any time.

The Quality Label provides the organisations with access to the ESC Portal where they can publish their volunteering vacancies as well as search for potential volunteers.

Solidarity projects do not need to apply for a Quality Label as they are developed and implemented by young people themselves.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS PROGRAMME

KEY FINDINGS

- Although the implementation of the programme began in late 2021 due to the delayed adoption of the programme's legal basis in May 2021, stakeholders surveyed as part of this analysis found the programme launch effective.

- Stakeholders believe administrative requirements have increased since the ESC was separated from the Erasmus+ programme, increasing the administrative burden for national agencies and organisations involved in ESC projects.

- While the increased lump sums were seen as a positive development, budgetary constraints persisted, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis and high inflation across the EU.

- Stakeholders highlighted that inclusion measures are not systematically included across projects and there is therefore a need to rethink the design of such measures. A suggestion was made that good practices on inclusion measures should be better promoted at European and national levels alongside increasing awareness-raising efforts and communication campaigns about the ESC in general, as well as in this particular area of focus.

- The inclusion of Green Deal related priorities in the goals and objectives of the ESC and its projects is viewed very favourably by stakeholders.

3.1. Overview

The policy aspects of implementation are the responsibility of the Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). The practical aspects of implementation are handled by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). However, a large part of this activity is devolved (indirect management) to national agencies[36], some of which are also responsible for the implementation of Erasmus+. The actions represented by indirect management are shown below.

The calls are published centrally on the EU funding portal that is shared with Erasmus+[37], but applications are made to the national agencies. The exceptions are the calls for volunteering teams in high-priority areas and the humanitarian aid projects, which are in the hands of EACEA. This breakdown is illustrated in schematic form below.

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[36] The list of ESC national agencies can be accessed here: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/contact-national-agencies_en
[37] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-esc/index/

Figure 2: The management model of the European Solidarity Corps
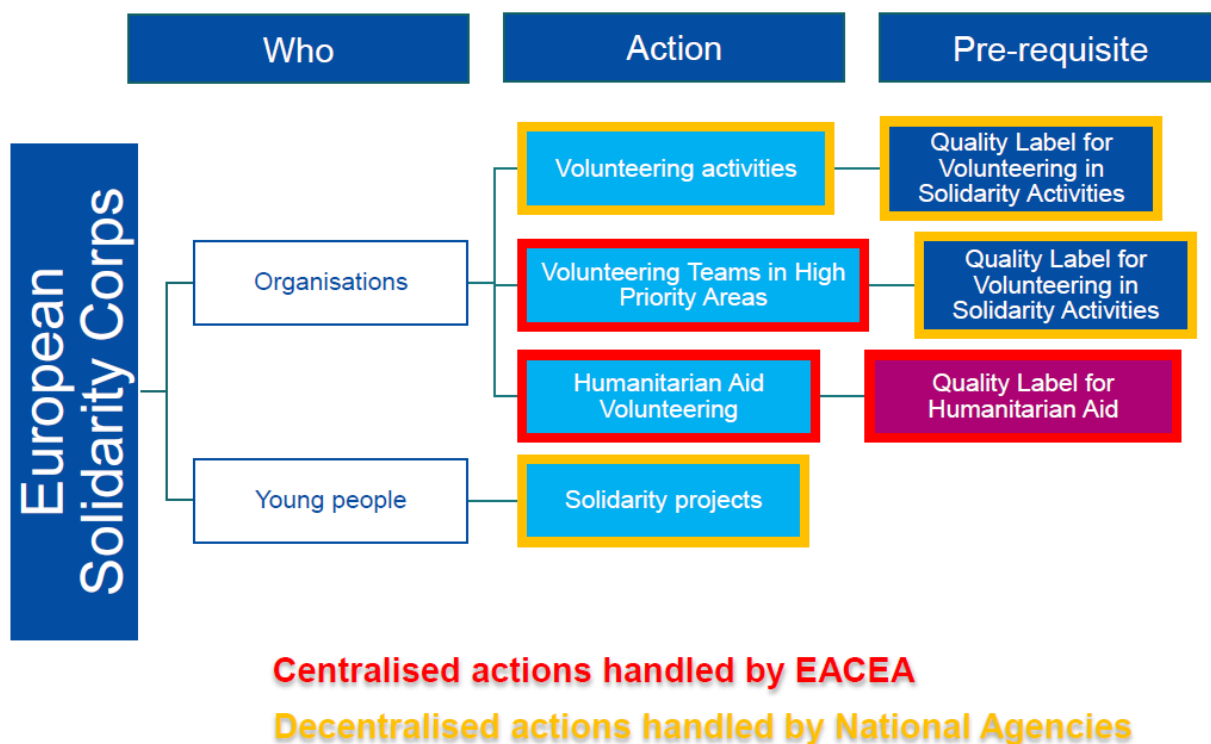
Source: EACEA, (2022). Online Info Day, European Solidarity Corps.[38]

The tasks of national agencies include: the provision of information on the programme; the selection of volunteering and solidarity projects to be funded; the monitoring and evaluation of the programme; the provision of support for applicants and participants; working with other national agencies and the European Commission; the promotion of the European Solidarity Corps; as well as sharing success stories and best practices[39].

A new feature that the ESC adopted from the EVS is the requirement for organisations participating in the programme to obtain a Quality Label (described in section 2.1.2). According to stakeholder feedback, the introduction of the Quality Label is beneficial, as it acts as a way of strengthening the dedication of the organisations towards solidarity. At the same time, concerns were raised about access of the European umbrella associations to obtaining this label; there is a need to apply for the label with the NA of the country in which the organisation is based and in which they need to show local impact. The feedback received through the call for evidence also suggested including more training and guidance for the organisations that obtain the lead Quality Label in terms of management of direct and indirect costs[40]. This could be achieved by, for example, including concrete examples of the type of costs that may be considered eligible direct[41] and indirect[42] costs in the annual European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide[43].

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[38] Available at:
https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/Presentation_Info%20Day%202022%20Humanitarian%20Aid%20Volunteering.pdf
[39] Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/contact-national-agencies_en
[40] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en
[41]Costs directly linked to the performance of the action.
[42] General administrative costs that are not covered by eligible direct costs but which can be regarded as chargeable to the project.
[43] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf

Despite the attempts to provide programme and call information in an accessible way, survey results obtained by this study indicate that wider stakeholders, including beneficiaries of ESC grants, are not convinced that ESC programme announcements and calls are overall clear – almost one-third (31%) of those responding to the questionnaire said that the information is not clear.

3.1.1. Learning and training

The learning and training aspect of participating in ESC projects is considered fundamental. This is part of the quality support role provided by the EACEA. Those selected for an activity receive module-based general online training on ethics, integrity, roles and responsibilities of the participants, European values, inter-cultural awareness, thematic training, and health and safety. They are also eligible for language support either in the form of a grant of EUR 150 or via access to the online language support (OLS) on the Commission's e-learning platform[44].

To try to ensure that the processes are youth-friendly, a special section of the EU youth portal dealing with the European Solidarity Corps[45] has been created, complementing information from DG EAC and EACEA on the EU Europa portal. Training and tools available from SALTO-Youth[46] are summarised in Box 1.

Box 1: Strategic support from SALTO-Youth

Strategic support is also available from the Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth (SALTO-Youth)[47]. The EU funds seven such centres to provide training and tools to support activities in the field of youth. One of these is dedicated to supporting the European Solidarity Corps. For example, an **online course (MOOC)** was organised between September and November 2022 on the "essentials of the European Solidarity Corps": how to organise a volunteering project; how to become a corps volunteer; how a youth group can prepare and implement a local solidarity project; the opportunities of new humanitarian aid activity; preparing to apply for the grant; acquiring the Solidarity Corps Quality Label; and the types of support available for young people in the projects[48]. The European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre has identified five areas where it wants to make an impact in the period 2021-2027: **Shaping solidarity**: establishing a European narrative of solidarity and obtaining recognition for the value of solidarity; **Strengthening European Volunteering**: improving the conditions for volunteering across Europe and partner regions; **Embedding solidarity**: promoting the value of solidarity across all actions and activities of the EU youth programmes; **Supporting quality implementation**: providing effective support for national agencies and (regional) SALTOs in the implementation to maximise the impact of the ESC programme; **Supporting the building of a community of practice**: creating a thriving European community of practice around the Solidarity Corps[49].

A training and evaluation cycle has been set up for volunteers (except those involved in solidarity projects) and for organisations. For participants, it complements support they are offered by the

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[44] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. Available at:
https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf
[45] Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_en
[46] SALTO also handles applications for the Quality Label from countries not associated with the programme
[47] Available at: https://www.salto-youth.net/about/
[48] Available at: https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/mooc-esc/
[49] 2021-27 Strategy SALTO European Solidarity Corps. Available at: https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4299/SALTO-ESC-Strategy.pdf

participating organisations before they start their volunteering activity and while they are volunteering. Once they complete the individual activities within the training and evaluation cycle, participants are eligible to include their results in the Youthpass, which accredits non-formal learning[50]. For organisations, the training and evaluation cycle provides support and tools to carry out high-quality projects and is an opportunity to exchange and network with other European Solidarity Corps actors[51]. The cycle is illustrated below.

Figure 3: Training and evaluation cycle
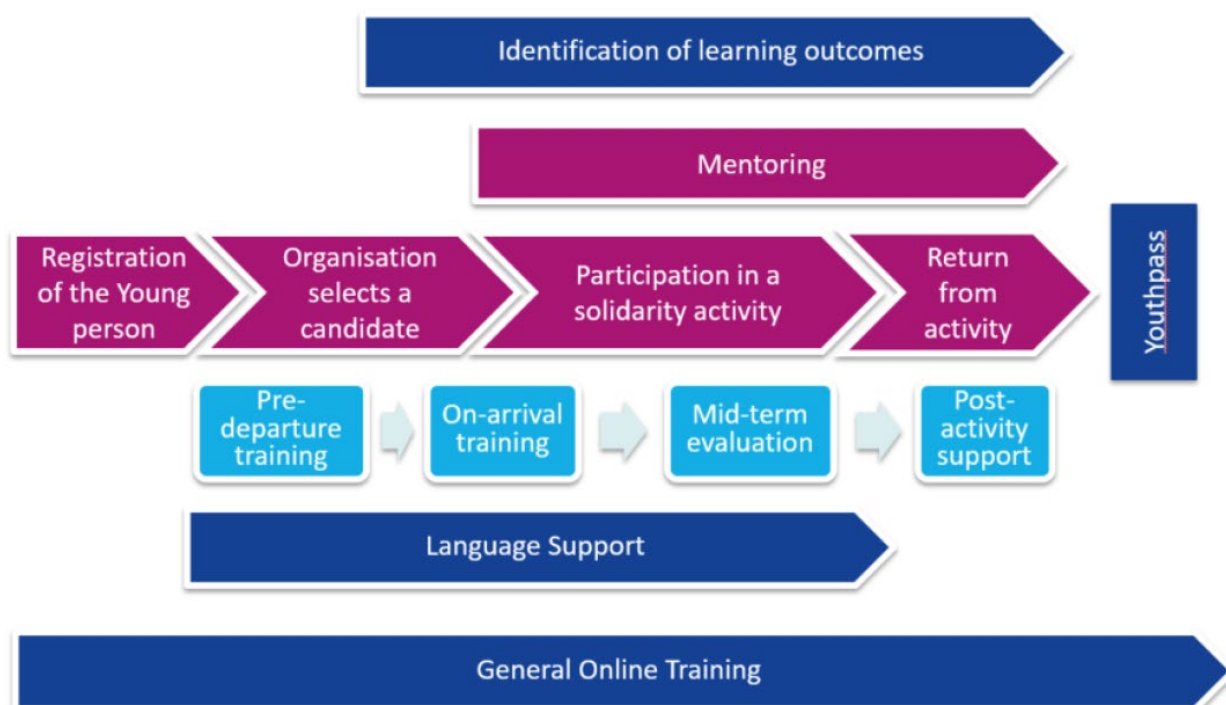
Source: European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide 2023

In the online survey among NAs and wider stakeholders, 41.2% of responding wider stakeholders recognised that the ESC has contributed to a large extent to reaching the objective of "increasing non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people". At the same time, an NA commented that the seminars for volunteers do not have enough content and are too long. One of the wider stakeholders noted that due to the ESC flat rates being low, they are no longer able to provide in-person language courses to their participants.

More than 51%[52] of the wider stakeholder respondents were not convinced that the Online Language Support (OLS) effectively improved participants' knowledge of the language to make the most out of their experience. A similar view, albeit to a lesser extent, was expressed about the OLS courses being interactive and tailor-made, with 13.3% partially disagreeing and 30.0% fully disagreeing.

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[50] Available at: https://www.youthpass.eu/
[51] European Commission (2023). European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide. Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/european_solidarity_corps_guide_2023_en.pdf
[52] 25.8% partly disagreed, 25.8% fully disagreed

3.1.2.　Monitoring

Apart from the monitoring and evaluation carried out at project level by the national agencies, several programme-level indicators were included in the programme Regulation[53]. Data are available on milestones and targets, but not yet on actual progress, as shown below. The data are collected either from the databases on applications and grants or from a participant survey.

The lack of published data to measure progress of the implementation of the ESC is problematic since it limits the transparency of the programme and generally hampers clarity of the programme performance. In addition, the Commission's funding and tender opportunities portal (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area, SEDIA) where ESC calls and funded projects are published offers very limited filters of project data. This means that external stakeholders cannot feasibly analyse the main characteristics of the ESC project portfolio – for example, projects by country, type of organisation and budget.

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[53] Annex to: Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme, op. cit.

Table 2: 2027 Indicator milestones and targets 2021-2027, 2030[54]

	Baseline	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2030 Target
Participants in volunteering solidarity activities	0	15,000	16,210	15,238	15,562	15,886	16,210	16,535	110,641
Participants in solidarity projects	0	9,000	9,726	9,143	9,337	9,532	9,726	9,921	66,385
Participants in humanitarian aid related solidarity activities	0	0	0	550	550	550	550	550	2,027
Share of participants with fewer opportunities	0%	34%	30%	30%	30%	30%	30%	30%	
Number of organisations holding a Quality Label	0	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	21,000
Number of participants who are young people with fewer opportunities	0	4,500	4,863	4,571	4,669	4,766	4,863	4,960	33,192
Share of participants reporting positive learning outcomes	0%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%
Share of participants whose learning outcomes have been documented through a Union transparency and recognition tool	0%	80%	80%	80%	80%	80%	80%	80%	80%
Overall satisfaction rate of participants regarding the quality of activities	0%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%

Source: European Commission (2023). *Programme Statement, European Solidarity Corps, p.278*

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[54] No milestones have been set for 2028 and 2029.

3.2.   Launch phase

The third phase of the European Solidarity Corps began implementation in late 2021 due to the delayed adoption of the programme's legal basis in May 2021. Despite this setback, at the time of the launch, nearly 330,000 young people expressed willingness to participate in ESC projects by registering for the ESC on the Youth Portal. Nearly 3,500 projects received grants between 2021-2022 under the ESC involving around 2,400 different organisations across the participating countries. The projects involved just under 40,000 young people, of which about 35% were persons with fewer opportunities. About 65% of the total number of participants were female[55].

The Commission acknowledged in the ESC programme statement that the first year of implementation had been exceptionally challenging in terms of budget management. The late adoption of the programme negatively affected various aspects of the ESC's activities. For instance, the start of the activities (calls, selection, contracts, payments) was postponed to the second part of 2022. Furthermore, payments initially planned to be made in 2021 were shifted to 2022. Consequently, only 7% of the programme budget was implemented and paid in 2021. The remaining funds are implemented by EACEA (15%) and by the Commission (3%). Budgetary constraints were also noted as the 2022 payment appropriations were used to cover the payments on the 2022 commitments, as well as the payments on ongoing projects from 2021[56].

The results of the survey found that there are issues with some administrative aspects of the programme. The clarity of administrative requirements is perceived quite negatively, with 55.1% of NA survey respondents indicating a negative perception. This view was shared by the wider stakeholders to a slightly lesser extent (35.5%). Most respondents also agreed that the information required in the administrative proposal is not proportional to the funding allocated. For example, a respondent to the survey pointed out that an NA required the applicants to use 13 different online systems to receive on average a grant of EUR 13,000.

Furthermore, feedback indicated that the user-friendliness of the administrative proposal template is another area where improvements should be sought. The somewhat negative feedback could be due to the change in the format of the grant agreements that occurred recently, and the stakeholders therefore need to get used to these changes. Nonetheless, efforts should be made to continuously improve the processes in order to reduce administrative burdens as well as increase user-friendliness and continuous use of the ESC funding.

The difficulty of fulfilling the administrative requirements at the application phase could also be due to the need to improve the IT tools within the ESC (see section 3.6 for more information). Furthermore, it was highlighted that the NAs should receive more training and guidance on recognising and dealing with suspicious and fraudulent cases.

Regarding any improvements in the efficiency and user-friendliness of the ESC programme compared to previous iterations, the responses were varied. The NA respondents partly agreed (27%) that the processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission are not simpler than in the previous iteration of the programme, but they partly disagreed (27%) that the time from submitting the application to receiving the grant has improved. Regarding the process of grant preparation, the

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[55] European Commission. European Solidarity Corps – Performance. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en#mff-2014-2020--european-solidarity-corps

[56] European Commission (2023). Programme Statement, European Solidarity Corps, p.271-272. Available at: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230331171125/https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/ps_db2023_esc_h2.pdf

respondents partly (41%) or fully disagreed (18%) that it has become simpler than in 2014-2020. These sentiments are to an extent echoed by wider stakeholders who indicate that the processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission and the processes of grant preparations have improved, while the time to grant the funding has not improved. This is particularly detrimental at the early stages of projects where there is a need for a greater level of flexibility.

The results of the survey also revealed that opinions were mixed with regard to the Commission's and national communication activities on the 2021-2027 programme, which can be improved to enhance the visibility of this relatively new programme. Regarding the solidarity aspect, it was considered by several NAs that the programme's budget was insufficient since it did not allow newcomers to effectively participate in the programme by applying to receive funding.

3.3. Budget and resources

The total budget for the 2021-2027 programme is EUR 1 009 million, with 94% allocated to the volunteering and solidarity projects and the remainder earmarked for humanitarian aid volunteering, as outlined in the table below.[57]

Table 3: European Solidarity Corps budget 2021-2027

	Budget available (EUR)
Budget for volunteering and solidarity projects	948.5 million
Budget for humanitarian aid volunteering	60.5 million

Source: Regulation 2021/817

The programme is managed through annual work programmes, which establish the annual budget. The work programmes also contain annual breakdowns of the budget by country. The table below provides a breakdown of the budget per year.

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[57] This budget figure is the amount in the programme Regulation. The final figure will be higher as a result of annual adjustments for inflation and contributions from Iceland and Liechtenstein.

Table 4: Annual budget, 2021-2023[58]

	Annual budget (EUR million)	Of which indirect management	Indirect management as % of annual budget
2021	138.9	114.4	82.4%
2022	150.0	126.4	84.3%
2023	142.2	121.0	85.1%

Source: Annual Work Programmes, 2021[59], 2022[60], 2023[61]

In 2021-2022, 62 proposals for the "Volunteering, traineeships, jobs and solidarity projects" action were submitted. Of these, 54 met the requirements, and 45 were chosen. For the "Networking activities, quality and support measures" action, 192 proposals were submitted, and 177 were eligible, with 140 selected. Thus, the success rate was 83% and 79%, respectively, when comparing the number of selected proposals to the number of eligible ones[62].

Figure 4: ESC: Key actions – submitted proposals, success rate from eligible proposals, success rate total
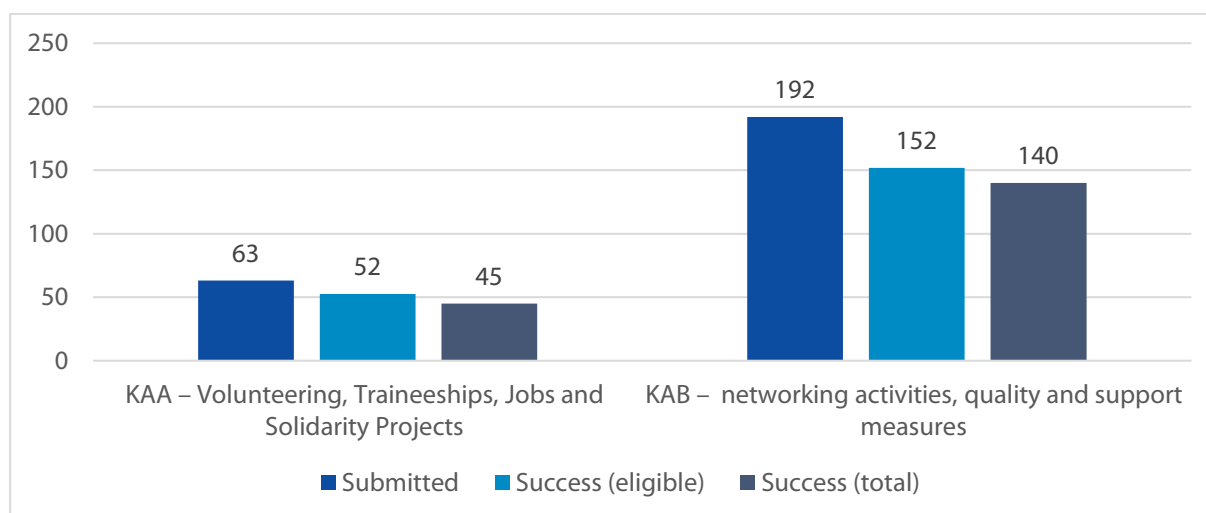
Source: European Parliament Research Service, 2023

The figure below shows the overall budget allocated for each action in the ESC programme. This budget covers both the direct and indirect implementation of the work programme items.

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[58] Figures rounded for ease of reading.

[59] European Commission (2021). 2021 annual work programme for the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. Available at: https://europa.eu/youth/sites/default/files/c20212390_-_13_04_2021.pdf

[60] European Commission (2022). Amendment of 2022 annual work programme for the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. Available at: https://europa.eu/youth/sites/default/files/c20221311_of_08_03_2022.pdf

[61] European Commission (2023). 2023 annual work programme for the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. Available at: https://europa.eu/youth/sites/default/files/2023_annual_work_programme.pdf

[62] Bacian, I. C. and K., Eisele, 2023, *Early implementation of four 2021-2027 EU programmes: Erasmus+, Creative Europe, European Solidarity Corps and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (Strand 3)*. European Implementation Assessment. European Parliament Research Service. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2023)747442

Figure 5: ESC: Sums of budget per year (direct + indirect management)
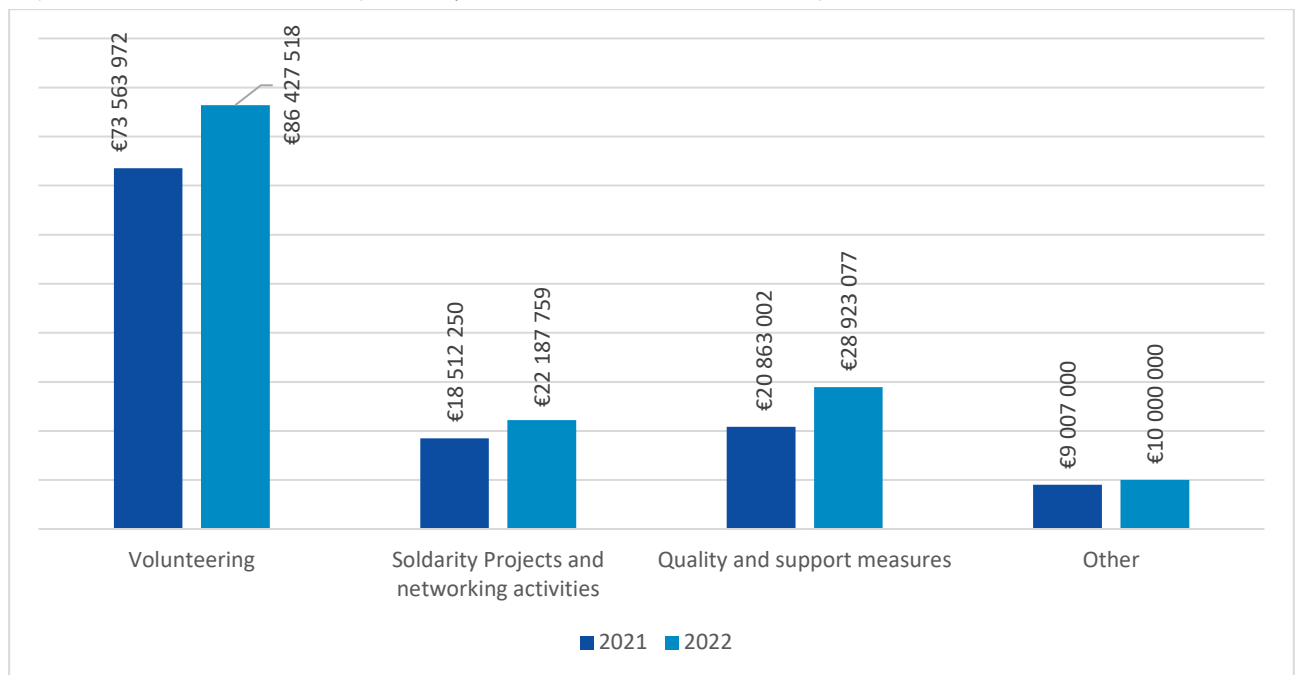
Source: own representation based on EC, 2023 (all fund sources including EU voted budget and assigned revenues)

Despite an increase in the budget in 2022 compared to 2021 due to 2022 being the European Year of Youth[63], only about 30% of the national authorities that answered the online survey on the implementation of the ESC indicated satisfaction with the overall budget available in their country, with about 50% of them saying that they were not satisfied[64] with the amounts available. In particular, the budgets of solidarity projects were highlighted as needing to be increased. The underlying cause for the funding's insufficiency could be the economic downturn and high inflation in 2022.

The increased lump sums were seen as a positive development. However, a stakeholder pointed out that the overall financing was reduced. This meant that while the flat rates (all bar pocket money) have increased, these cannot be passed down to the participants in most cases – for example, through increases in the food allowance – as the amounts need to last the whole duration of the activities.

The need to revise the lump sums and unit costs was also highlighted in the feedback received through a call for evidence[65] by the European Commission. The primary reason given was that the rates have not changed in the past few years in many Member States, even though this should be a particular priority, in order to enable young volunteers to cope with the rise in prices and to allow host structures which have limited financial resources to continue their participation in the ESC. Without a significant increase in the budget, the development of the programme will slow down, since it will not be possible to involve new organisations.

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[63] European Commission, 2021, *European Solidarity Corps: over €138 million to support volunteering activities by young people in 2022*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6003

[64] 25% somewhat dissatisfied, 25% very dissatisfied

[65] In order to evaluate the European Solidarity Corps' implementation thus far, a call for evidence ran between 18 October – 15 November 2022. Altogether 25 valid feedback instances were received, 19 of which were from non-governmental organisations. The call for evidence will be followed by a public consultation in Q3 of 2023 to collect further input. European Commission, European Solidarity Corps – evaluation of current and former programmes. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en

Another issue regarding the budget highlighted by the wider stakeholders is that applicants for a grant do not know beforehand the amount they may receive. The amount is calculated directly by the NA, which makes it very difficult to plan the project, especially from the financial perspective.

Overall, the survey showed that wider stakeholders are dissatisfied with the budget distribution and the financial management at the programme level, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 6: Level of satisfaction with the budget distribution and financial management at the programme level? N=39
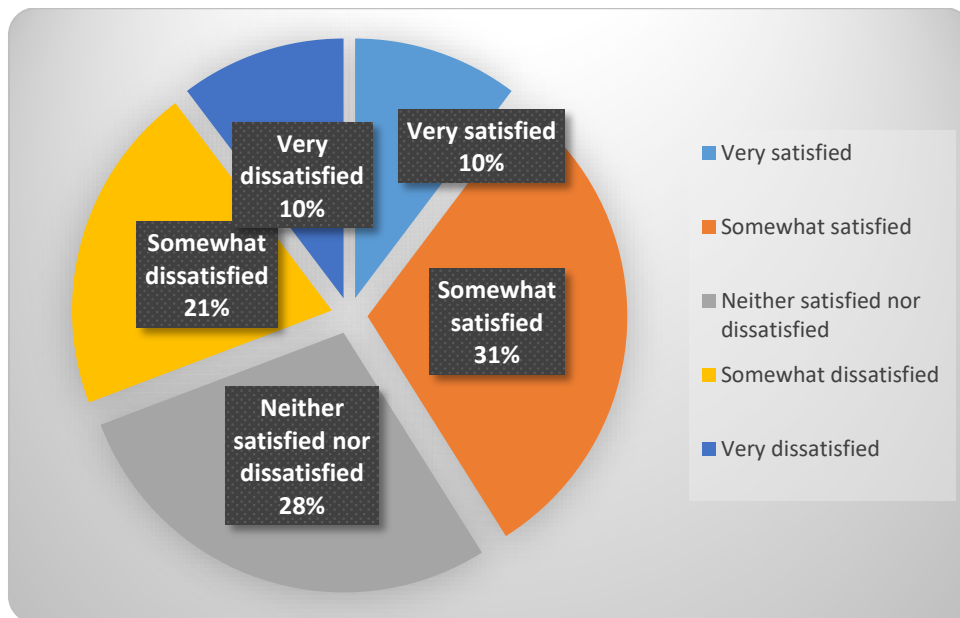
Source: VVA survey of wider stakeholders and beneficiaries of the ESC

Some of the suggestions for improvement in connection with budget and resources mentioned a centralised platform that would allow uploading amendments to grant agreements. Currently, an amendment needs to be submitted to the NA via an email which may lead to a delay. Furthermore, survey respondents believe that increasing the maximum threshold for funding a single organisation could lead to more professional implementation of the projects.

3.4. Inclusion measures

To support the importance attached to inclusion and diversity, the European Commission issued a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy in April 2021[66] and developed a shared framework for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps that was adopted in October 2021[67]. The objective is to ensure equal access to programmes for groups who tend to have fewer opportunities because, for example, they have a disability or their health is an obstacle to participation. They may also come from a migrant background, have learning difficulties or come from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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[66] European Commission (2021). Implementation guidelines: Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy; http://www.salto-youth.net/download/4177/InclusionAndDiversityStrategy.pdf

[67] Commission Implementing Decision - framework of inclusion measures of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps 2021-27 https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-decision-framework-inclusion-2021-27

The strategy sets out several ways in which the programme mechanisms are designed to ensure fairer access. They include *inter alia* prioritising inclusion and diversity when assessing projects, and a user-friendly approach to programme guidance. In the European Solidarity Corps, the latter priority led to accessibility features of the European Youth Portal, such as the possibility to enlarge the text for visually impaired people and reader-friendly leaflets[68]. Further measures, as outlined in the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, include reinforced mentorship – i.e. additional support to participants via frequent meetings or more time allocated to task implementation, language support (which is discussed in section 3.1.1) and dedicated financial support, for instance for small organisations that have little experience with applying for the programme. As mentioned above, inclusion support is a feature of the European Solidarity Corps; it provides opportunities for young people from vulnerable backgrounds or with special needs.

Furthermore, to enhance the inclusion measures and adapt them to different national contexts across the Member States, national agencies are also required to develop a national inclusion and diversity action plan tailored to the national context, while remaining consistent with the EU-level strategy.

The survey results indicate that inclusion measures could be better implemented. Among the NAs, there was a suggestion that good practices on such measures should be better promoted both at European and national levels through more awareness-raising efforts and communication campaigns about the ESC in general, as well as on this particular area. Furthermore, it was suggested that "inclusion should be worked on in a different way and not by a questionnaire at the end, where the young people don't know how to assess themselves. This should go hand in hand with the organisations and also give them the opportunity to ask for the budget beforehand"[69]. As the organisations are able to include these measures in their proposal when applying to the ESC, this shows that there is a need to increase the visibility of such information among potential applicants. Furthermore, further thought on how to design and include these types of measures may be needed.

According to the call for evidence, the structural conditions in the solidarity projects are often difficult for young people, especially in the area of inclusion. Above all, the long period of time between application, funding response and project implementation is unsuitable for small local projects carried out by young people. They also struggle with the application forms, which continue to be complex. For the greater inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, a suggestion made by several stakeholders could be to increase the age limit of 30 as often young people in difficult situations are only willing to do voluntary service later in life. Similarly, a suggestion was made to also lower the minimum age limit from 18 to 16.

In line with this finding, in the Commission's call for evidence[70], a suggestion was made to improve the overall approach, description and tools in order to be inclusive and consider also the predispositions of participants with special needs. Furthermore, it was of utmost importance to stakeholders that the communication strategy also includes specific approaches to raise awareness and interest among disadvantaged groups.

Finally, the call for evidence[71] also criticised the reduction of the role of the sending organisations. It would be particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to benefit from a strengthened and clarified supporting role of the sending organisations before, during and after the

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[68] For instance, see here: https://79060753.flowpaper.com/GoInclusiveLeafletEasyRead/#page=1
[69] Survey responses.
[70] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en
[71] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en

voluntary service. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the number of young people suffering from mental health issues has increased. Therefore, the individual approach and good care facilitated by the sending organisations is highly necessary (for more information see section 3.7).

3.5.   Sustainability measures

Several European Parliament resolutions on green issues have mentioned the European Solidarity Corps. For instance, the abovementioned Resolution of 15 September 2020 was passed expressing the need to make the European Solidarity Corps 'greener'[72]. The resolution explains that one of the important solidarity activities of the ESC is protecting the environment. As such, the programme should do its utmost to promote sustainable practices and increase the visibility of projects that aim to protect the environment. The current programming period of the ESC has emphasised the need to work towards environmental sustainability and climate goals: for instance, in its 2021 Annual Work Programme[73], this aim was set as one of the key priorities, while in the 2023 Annual Work Programme, the ESC's intended contributions to the New European Bauhaus and the EU Forest Strategy are emphasised[74]. Additionally, the announcements and calls at the national level include the recommendation to incorporate sustainable practices in the proposed projects.

Wider stakeholders' view is fairly positive about the incorporation of environmental and climate issues in the programme. Survey respondents were especially positive about the inclusion of Green Deal-related priorities in the goals and objectives of ESC projects, as shown in the table below.

Table 5: Extent to which Green Deal priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the ESC programme – wider stakeholders

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	7.9%	7.7%	5.0%	5.0%
To a large extent	13.2%	12.8%	**22.5%**	10.0%
To a moderate extent	**26.3%**	**25.6%**	20.0%	**25.0%**
To a limited extent	5.3%	5.1%	5.0%	12.5%
Not at all	2.6%	5.1%	0%	0%
Don't know	44.7%	43.6%	47.5%	47.5%

Source: VVA survey of wider stakeholders and beneficiaries of the ESC

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[72] Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020IP0211&print=true
[73] European Commission. (2021). 2021 annual work programme for the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme
[74] European Commission (2022). 2023 annual work programme for the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023_annual_work_programme.pdf

Stakeholders also made suggestions for improvement including more green incentives to encourage ESC beneficiaries to choose not just green options for travel, but also for accommodation and subsistence (e.g. accommodation that uses solar energy as the primary source of electricity or locally sourced food with a low environmental impact). This would require specific funding.

3.6.   Digitalisation and IT tools

The European Solidarity Corps operates with the aid of a few IT tools. This includes the ESC platform, incorporated in the European Youth Portal, which provides general information and an overview of past and present projects. It also allows young people to register and find opportunities and organisations to implement their activities. This platform is continuously improved in order to ensure that the processes are user-friendly. Organisations can find and contact potential participants via the European Solidarity Corps Placement Administration and Support System (PASS), and they can offer placements and issue certifications to the participants[75]. Furthermore, the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps platform[76] acts as the portal for the organisations to register and submit applications for grants. The applications are then evaluated by the national agencies and the organisations are informed on the outcome of the application via the platform.

The survey asked stakeholders about the functionality of the IT tools, their positive aspects and shortcomings. In general, the NAs expressed dissatisfaction with the IT tools, as around 55% of them partially or fully disagree that the IT tools used for the application process of the programme are user-friendly. In fact, the stakeholders view the IT tools as either poorly designed or too complex, with a clear need for them to be made more intuitive and user-friendly in order to make the application process easier and faster. Similarly, 45% of the NAs believe that the IT tools complicate the beneficiaries' application process. Moreover, the stakeholders reported other issues with the IT tools, such as frequent system errors when attempting to submit reports.

Furthermore, stakeholders believe that administrative requirements have increased since the ESC was separated from the Erasmus+ programme, thus increasing the administrative burden for national authorities and organisations involved in ESC projects, as mentioned in the sections above.

A response to the call for evidence[77] from an organisation involved in the ESC highlighted that there should be more training opportunities on how to use the various IT tools and evaluation templates that are required for the implementation of the projects. Furthermore, short and practical video tutorials could be introduced to understand the platform and the various IT aspects.

3.7.   Effectiveness and added value

Based on the stakeholder consultation, the programme's management is considered effective overall, primarily due to good communication with the national agencies and the efficient sharing of important information. Nevertheless, the issues with the budget (see section 3.3) and the IT tools (see section 3.6) mentioned by stakeholders can hinder the effectiveness of the programme.

Another problem hampering the effectiveness of the programme is the infrequent call for applicants. Having two/three application deadlines for solidarity projects per year are viewed as not being

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[75] European Solidarity Corps. (2022). Placement Administration and Support System (PASS) User Guide for organisations. Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/pass_user_guide.pdf
[76] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-esc/index/
[77] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en

frequent enough. This could pose a barrier for young people, as they perhaps do not plan that long in advance. For short solidarity projects, the administrative burden is too high; there should be shorter projects for possibly less money and easier application conditions.

Furthermore, the content of the seminars for volunteers needs greater focus to ensure adequate quality and length. The decision to move the seminars away from the organisations themselves was seen as a negative step. However, in the call for evidence[78], it was highlighted that such seminars should receive more funding so that they can take place more frequently and facilitate exchange of good practices across the ESC countries. The sending organisation should have the option of conducting all the necessary compulsory ESC preparatory seminars for their volunteers themselves. In doing so, they would pick up on the content priorities of the EU programme, while also being able to set their own priorities and topics. In this way, they will contribute to ensuring a diverse content orientation. Furthermore, there is a need to improve the guidelines, considering also the possibility of in-country placements.

The lack of a programme committee, similar to the one that exists for Erasmus+, was highlighted as a shortcoming. The creation of such a committee, as required by the ESC Regulation, could also strengthen the political awareness of the programme and its importance in contributing to the integration of youth into the society. This, in turn, could lead to increased awareness-raising efforts on the ESC at European and national levels.

On the other hand, the existence of the CIGNA insurance was highlighted as a positive aspect in the responses to the call for evidence[79]. However, to emphasise its advantages, a video tutorial for the NGOs and volunteers explaining the areas covered can provide a good overview of the insurance.

Regarding the added value of the European Solidarity Corps, in general, the programme is a valuable tool for fostering solidarity among young people. It increases their interest in volunteering and assists them in transitioning from school to work. As mentioned in Section 3.4, the programme also helps young people develop their skills and provides opportunities for those from vulnerable backgrounds and with special needs. In fact, the wider stakeholder respondents to the survey highlighted that, in their view, the ESC is highly relevant and meets genuine needs even if the implementation process could be improved.

Furthermore, with regards to volunteer projects, it is important to highlight the comprehensive support provided to young people, as well as the wide range of learning experiences and potential for individual development. Similarly, from the point of view of the organisations, the extensive opportunities to become active in the ESC and also to gain learning experiences as an organisation should be emphasised.

The programme and its activities have also proven their flexibility to respond to society's pain points and challenges at the community level, as demonstrated, for example, by its reaction to the reception and adaptation of Ukrainian refugees[80].

Additionally, the participation of third-country nationals and the inclusion of several non-EU countries in the programme creates added value. However, visa processing difficulties for these participants were highlighted, leading to some applications from third-country nationals in the programme being

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[78] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en
[79] Ibidem.
[80] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en

rejected. In fact, as a response to the Commission's call for evidence, some stakeholders from third countries called for an in-depth analysis on how to ameliorate the participation of third countries not associated with the programme[81].

Besides the overarching added value, elements that the NAs themselves highlighted as particularly successful within their own countries included:

- Inclusion and green priorities
- The Quality Label
- The demand from applications
- Solidarity projects
- Hosting volunteers, both individual and team projects
- Reacting to different challenges by organisations involved in both volunteering and solidarity projects
- The motivation of NGOs to accept ESC volunteers
- Micro-grants under transnational cooperation activities/networking activities in the European Year of Youth.

These and further aspects related to the strengths and weaknesses of the programme are further analysed in section 5.

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[81] Ibidem.

4. REPERCUSSIONS OF EXTERNAL FACTORS

KEY FINDINGS

- COVID-19 impacted the programme, in particular in 2020 when a call for proposal was cancelled. However, programme activities have also aimed to help those particularly at risk from COVID-19. For example, ESC volunteers assisted older adults by helping them with grocery shopping and medical needs.

- Russian aggression against Ukraine has impacted the programme in different ways. On the one hand, projects aimed at aiding Ukrainian refugees have been funded, and organisations became interested in working with individuals migrating from Ukraine. On the other hand, collaboration with organisations and young people from Russia and Belarus has ceased since they are no longer eligible for funding.

- While the increased lump sums were seen as a positive development, budgetary constraints persisted, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis and high inflation across the EU.

4.1. The COVID-19 pandemic and recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the European Solidarity Corps in 2020, and a call for proposals was cancelled under the programming period. As a result of the pandemic, some of the participants were not able to travel either to their host location or to their home base[82]. Furthermore, in 2020, the European Commission gave permission to postpone planned activities by up to 12 months[83]. Due to the extensions granted, some of the payments scheduled for 2021 were moved to 2022 and 2023[84].

Despite the pandemic, more than 3,000 volunteers participated in the programme in 2021[85]. These volunteers assisted older adults by helping them with grocery shopping and medical needs. For example in Poland, pandemic-related projects focused on promoting an active lifestyle among children, youth and seniors[86], as well as improving the digital skills of seniors due to the increased use of digital tools in daily life. The aim was to alleviate the negative effects of the pandemic[87].

In 2022, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the impact of the COVID-19 closures on educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people[88]. The EP expressed a

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[82] European Youth Portal. Coronavirus: Consequences for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps mobility activities. Accessed on 03 August 2023. Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/coronavirus-info_en
[83] European Commission (2020). Essential practical advice to participants in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps mobility activities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/erasmus-esc-factsheet-covid19-20200325_en.pdf
[84] European Commission (2023). Programme Statement, European Solidarity Corps, p.271-272. Available at: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230331171125/https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/ps_db2023_esc_h2.pdf
[85] European Commission (2023). Programme Statement, European Solidarity Corps, p.271-272. Available at: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230331171125/https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/ps_db2023_esc_h2.pdf
[86] Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/projects/details/2021-2-PL01-ESC30-SOL-000039047
[87] Available at: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/projects/details/2021-1-PL01-ESC30-SOL-000036204
[88]European Parliament resolution of 13 September 2022 on the impact of COVID-19 closures of educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people in the EU. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0314_EN.html

need to increase the funding of the ESC and to enhance visibility of the programme. These points are also brought up in the recommendations chapter of this study (see section 6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the programme's activities, and many initiatives in the current programming period are aimed at post-pandemic recovery. In particular, during the 2021-2027 programming period, the focus is on promoting, preventing and supporting health, including addressing the pandemic's impact and supporting recovery efforts. Moreover, volunteers will be involved in tackling other health-related challenges – e.g. in the context of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan[89].

4.2. The Russian aggression against Ukraine

The Russian aggression against Ukraine also impacted the European Solidarity Corps programme since Ukraine and Russia were partner countries in the programme. The influx of Ukrainian refugees to EU Member States has also had an effect on the programme, with projects being designed to aiding these people. Moreover, organisations became interested in working with individuals migrating from Ukraine. In practice, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted a range of projects from collecting food donations and assisting refugees at train stations to providing aid to Ukraine.

Nevertheless, collaboration with organisations and young people from Russia and Belarus has ceased since they are no longer eligible for funding. A consequence of this may be that the civil society organisations in these two countries, which do not receive public funding are becoming even more isolated in their efforts to uphold the principles of the ESC.

The importance of the ESC in addressing these challenges will become even more evident in future projects and reports on the programme's outcomes, since the invasion occurred after the beginning of the current programming period. This is especially true since more organisations may be seeking channels to coordinate their activities, and the ESC's 2023 annual work programme highlighting the aggression is expected to result in an increase in the number of applications for projects in this area.

4.3. The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)

The United Kingdom is not participating in the ESC programme 2021-2027. However, the country remains involved with the ESC until the closure of projects funded under the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework.

The decision to leave the European Union means that young people from the UK can no longer participate in the programme. The survey findings indicate that wider stakeholders disagree that the European Commission has made sufficient adjustments to the ESC to accommodate the UK's exit from the EU. This is in contrast to other external factors – COVID-19 and the Russian aggression against Ukraine – where both national agencies and wider stakeholder agree that the ESC programme has made adjustments.

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[89] Europe's Beating Cancer Plan

Table 6: Adjustments made by the European Commission to the ESC to accommodate for external factors – National Agencies

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	The Russian war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
Yes	**73.9%**	**78.3%**	**52.4%**
No	26.1%	21.7%	47.6%

Source: VVA survey of wider stakeholders and beneficiaries of the ESC

Table 7: Adjustments made by the European Commission to the ESC to accommodate for external factors – wider stakeholders

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	The Russian war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
Yes	**68.9%**	**52.4%**	35.7%
No	31.1%	47.6%	**64.3%**

Source: VVA survey of wider stakeholders and beneficiaries of the ESC

4.4.   The economic crisis

The economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience and solidarity of the Union. It also brought socio-economic challenges that have been deepened by the impacts of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.[90] One of the repercussions has been high inflation. The European Commission has implemented mitigation measures to tackle this challenge, such as increasing the lump sums provided to beneficiaries of the ESC. However, the survey findings and wider stakeholder consultations indicate that the measures in place are insufficient. When asked if any specific measures to cope with the current economic situation and inflation were incorporated by the European Commission and/or executive agencies and/or national agencies, 40.5% of wider stakeholders responded 'Yes' and 59.5% responded 'No'. Of the stakeholders who indicated in the affirmative, they gave the following examples of measures implemented:

- Increased lump sums
- Funding schemes adjusted to inflation
- Increased allowances

Although stakeholders recognised that measures had been taken to financially support ESC beneficiaries, there was equally a feeling that more needed to be done. One stakeholder said: "The lump sums were increased, but the budget was then extremely reduced. In order to still be able to implement the planned projects profitably, the increased flat rates (with the exception of pocket

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[90] See inter alia the section on ERASMUS+ AND THE RESILIENCE AND SOLIDARITY OF THE UNION in the Erasmus+ 2020 Work Programme, Version 2, available at:
https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-03/erasmusplus-awp-review-mar23_en.pdf#page=48&zoom=100,90,572

money) cannot be passed on to the young people in the form of increases in food allowances etc., but must be used to finance the duration of the activities."

5. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE ESC PROGRAMME

KEY FINDINGS

- The content of the programme is of high value, especially the solidarity aspect.

- Consolidating all solidarity activities into one access point was recognised as an improvement on the previous system.

- Information sharing among the network of national agencies is deemed to take place in a timely and efficient manner.

- The introduction of the Quality Label is viewed as a recognition of the dedication of the organisations to solidarity.

- Implementation faced challenges due to deferrals caused by the delayed adoption of the legal framework and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

- The discontinuation of the EVS label is seen as a weakness since the ESC needs to build up its own brand now rather than rely on the trustworthiness the EVS label has built over the past 20 years.

- There is a need to increase the budget of the ESC programme in order to meet the current demand and to handle a potential upsurge of applications resulting from strengthening of brand-building activities.

- The separation of the ESC from the Erasmus+ has created additional administrative burden that is viewed as unproportional to the funding allocated.

- The allocated budget for the projects is deemed low, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis and high inflation.

- Many issues with the IT tools have been reported by the stakeholders.

As an essentially new programme, it is too soon to assess all strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, some early conclusions can be drawn based on the stakeholder consultation and desk research conducted.

In terms of strengths, the national agencies generally believed that the programme is achieving its objectives. The ESC's programme content was considered to be of high value. The solidarity aspect also received very positive feedback, although several national agencies stressed that the programme's budget was insufficient since it did not allow newcomers to effectively participate in the programme by applying to receive funding. Nevertheless, in terms of proposal preparation and submission, and the processes of grant preparations, the stakeholders highlighted improvements on the previous programming period.

Communication with the national agencies was also highlighted as a strength, and it was emphasised that information is shared within the network in a timely and efficient manner.

Furthermore, the introduction of the Quality Label was welcomed as a way of strengthening the dedication of the organisations towards solidarity. However, stakeholders pointed out that there is a lack of training and guidance for organisations in terms of management of direct[91] and indirect[92] costs[93]. The introduction of the CIGNA insurance was highly regarded in the call for evidence responses as it provides the participants with an added layer of safety and transparency. Nonetheless, this aspect could benefit from better awareness that would lead to its greater trustworthiness. This could be achieved by developing video tutorials explaining the extent of its coverage, the requirements to be fulfilled and its advantages against commercial insurances.

Besides the CIGNA insurance, the comprehensive support provided to young people taking part in volunteering projects and the wide range of learning opportunities and experiences contributing to their individual development potential was emphasised. Similarly, from the point of view of the organisations, the extensive opportunities to become active in the ESC and also to gain learning experiences as an organisation should be emphasised.

External factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacted the implementation of the programme. However, these impacts revealed that the ESC is well positioned and above all flexible to contribute and adapt to alleviating challenges at local level as well as those that affect the EU as a whole. For instance, the programme responded well to the challenges caused by the pandemic, as many projects were designed to help those affected, such as the elderly and the most vulnerable. Similarly, multiple projects aiding Ukrainian refugees in the Member States were created. In the past, the main weakness of EU-level solidarity initiatives was that they were too fragmented as they were divided among three separate programmes for volunteers. With the creation of a single ESC, this weakness was expected to be addressed. In fact, having "a clear and single access point for organisations and young people [to] make solidarity activities more visible" was identified as a remedy to some of the weaknesses identified in the *ex-ante* evaluation that preceded the proposal for the current programme[94]. The identified weaknesses included a lack of transparency, a slow recruitment process, fragmented branding and communication, high costs and resource duplication. The evaluation feeding into these conclusions also anticipated that there would be efficiency gains in insurance costs, management fees and communication.

While there have been positive improvements, many weaknesses remain. For instance, regarding the issue of fragmented branding and communication, it was highlighted that the discontinuation of the European Voluntary Service label, a brand that has acquired visibility over more than 20 years, would mean that the new ESC must build up recognition from scratch. In general, while a communication strategy has been developed, there remains a need to increase awareness-raising and brand-building activities at both European and national levels to ensure the buy-in of not only public authorities but also civil societies and as well as participants, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore in connection with communication activities, the stakeholder survey revealed that while the ESC programme announcements and calls are seen as more or less clear by the national agencies, wider stakeholders disagree and view the lack of clarity of these announcements and calls as a weakness.

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[91] Costs directly linked to the performance of the action.

[92] General administrative costs that are not covered by eligible direct costs but which can be regarded as chargeable to the project.

[93] European Solidarity Corps - Call for evidence. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13507-European-Solidarity-Corps-evaluation-of-current-and-former-programmes_en

[94] Commission Staff Working Document Executive Summary of the Ex-Ante Evaluation Accompanying the Document Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme; https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=SWD%3A2018%3A318%3AFIN

Alongside the increased efforts into communication and promotional activities, there is a need to increase the budget of the ESC programme in order to ensure that these activities are not taking place at the cost of the project implementation. Strengthening of brand-building activities could bring in a potential upsurge of applications. As a result, yet more organisations and individuals would not be able to reach the available funds. Moreover, stakeholders believe that calls for applicants are not frequent enough (only two to three application deadlines for solidarity projects are set each year), They fear that new organisations and individuals will be discouraged from applying, thus hampering the fulfilment of ESC objectives.

In fact, the budget was also marked as a challenging aspect of the programme. For instance, due to the low budget coupled with inflation and the cost-of-living crisis in many countries, some organisations cannot afford to work with volunteers and have abandoned some projects. Moreover, while the increase of lump sums was highlighted as a positive development, the overall financing was reduced. These issues were also raised in the stakeholder surveys, responses to the call for evidence, as well as other stakeholder feedback collected during the data collection activities undertaken for this paper.

The complex administrative requirements were also highlighted as a weakness by the stakeholders. The programme is still relatively new and lacks the track record of some other programmes. National agencies and participating organisations require more time to become familiar with its processes. These include calculating project funding, procedures for obtaining the Quality Label[95], and procedures for awarding organisations. However, the stakeholders also pointed out that the separation of the ESC from the Erasmus+ has created additional administrative burden. Moreover, the survey highlighted that information required in the administrative proposal is not proportional to the funding allocated.

The stakeholder feedback also indicated that inclusion measures could be more enhanced and better implemented. Weaknesses in this area were highlighted regarding the long period of time from the application to receiving the funding and implementing the project, which makes participation difficult for small local projects. Regarding the participation of third-country nationals, the aspect of facilitating the visa processes for the ESC participants coming from third countries has been highlighted as another hurdle and often a determining factor in not accepting volunteers from outside of the EU. This could be alleviated by introducing an ESC-specific visa category. Together with this issue, provision of financial and legal support connected to visa procedures should be included among the support offered under the ESC to reduce the financial burden of the volunteers and participating organisations.

The inclusion measures and, in general, the overall objectives of the ESC could be further strengthened by establishing a programme committee, similar to the one that exists for Erasmus+. The creation of such committee, could also strengthen the political awareness of the programme and its importance in contributing to the integration of youth into the society.

The reduction of the role of the sending organisations has also been criticised within the responses to the call for evidence. In fact, it is felt that the supportive role before, during and after the voluntary service of sending organisations needs to be strengthened and clarified, especially for young people. This is also important in regards to the fact that the ESC promotes solidarity and involves young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the reduction of the role of the sending organisation and transfer of some of their responsibilities to other actors (such as the receiving organisations) has reduced the quality of seminars provided to the volunteers, according to respondents. At the same

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[95] The European Solidarity Corps Quality Label is used to certify that an organisation participating to the programme "is able to provide the necessary conditions young people to take part in solidarity activities". For more information, see:
https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/quality-label_en

time, call for evidence responses highlighted the need to increase funding for such seminars. The increase would allow the frequency to be increased and would facilitate the exchange of good practices across the ESC countries. The sending organisations should regain the possibility of conducting all the necessary compulsory ESC preparatory seminars for their volunteers themselves. Furthermore, there is a need to improve the guidelines, considering also the possibility of in-country placements.

Stakeholders also expressed dissatisfaction with the IT tools, pointing out that they are poorly designed and too complex – e.g. in terms of the beneficiaries' application process. Additionally, there are frequent system errors when submitting reports.

The table below provides a summary of the main perceived strengths and weaknesses of the ESC according to survey respondents.

Table 8: Overview of the ESC programme's strengths and weaknesses according to the survey findings

Strengths	Weaknesses
Early implementation of the ESC programme	
− The clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls − Progressing towards the achievement of the programme objectives − The ESC's content was considered to be high − The solidarity aspect is viewed very positively	− Lack of clarity of administrative requirements − Poor IT systems − The format of the grant agreements − European Commission support to the NAs.
Budget and resources	
− Proposal preparation and submission processes and grant preparations processes have improved	− Uneven budget distribution and financial management − Some NAs are dissatisfied with the grant preparation processes as well as timing of the grants in 2021-2027
EU priorities	
− The priorities of the Green Deal, digital transformation, and gender equality are present at least to a moderate extent	− Beneficiaries sometimes feel "forced" to take up these priorities − There is room for more green incentives
Effectiveness & added value	
− Most NAs and wider stakeholders confirmed that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives on time. − Successful elements of the programme include green priorities, the quality label, the high demand from applicants, the ability of the programme to react to different challenges, and the high motivation of NGOs to accept ESC volunteers	− Insufficient budget to meet demand − Poorly designed or overly complex IT tools systems and the need to make the application process easier
Application process	
− The project duration is considered to be sufficient	− The user-friendliness of the contracting procedures and tools seems to be the most contentious area where wider stakeholders did not find consensus − High administrative burden
Digitalisation and IT tools	
	− Too many technical errors caused by the IT tools − IT tools complicate the beneficiary's application process

Source: VVA survey of wider stakeholders and beneficiaries of the ESC

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following set of recommendations can be formulated based on the analysis carried out:

Recommendation 1: Increase the visibility and brand of the programme

The European Commission as well as national agencies should prioritise communication and awareness-raising efforts for the ESC programme, as it is currently not widely known to the public. To ensure effective campaigns, the EC and NAs should collaborate with the funded ESC projects to raise awareness via grass root means by promoting success stories and testimonials. This should be accompanied by a high-level campaign to increase the programme's visibility within European and national structures. Good practices could also be collected and promoted at the European and national level. Establishing a common branding strategy would facilitate the recognisability. Strengthening the prestige of the Quality Label would not only increase the visibility of the ESC but also contribute to its greater credibility.

However, if the communication activities are successful and more organisations end up applying, it would result in an even lower success rate for projects within the current limited budget leaving many organisations and young people discouraged. For this reason, increase of communication, promotional and awareness-raising activities needs to be accompanied with an increase in the budget of the ESC in order to be able to offer opportunities to potential new applicants. (see also Recommendation 2 below)

Recommendation 2: Ensure a sufficient budget as a prerequisite for guaranteeing the programme is accessible to persons from all socioeconomic backgrounds

As has been emphasised by the stakeholder consultation, the ESC requires a continuous increase of its budget. Furthermore, flat rate and lump sum features need to reflect the latest developments in the economy of the EU-27, including rising inflation. This will ensure that the participants are able to cover their basic expenses and decent living standards and prevent the participation within the programme becoming exclusive to persons from more well-off backgrounds. The budget ceiling for the individual projects, also in terms of administrative and resource costs, should be increased.

Recommendation 3: Reduce the administrative burden to adjust to the programme target groups

An effort should be made to continuously improve the processes in order to reduce the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries. The administrative processes should be better tailored to the young target groups of the programme, for whom the ESC is likely their first encounter with an EU-funded programme. Additional support (for example, in the form of training or video tutorials) should be provided to organisations, particularly those that focus on providing opportunities for participants from vulnerable backgrounds. (see also Recommendation 4 below)

Recommendation 4: Continue to enhance inclusion measures

Apart from the above budget-related aspects, the ESC, in general, should strive for the greater inclusivity of participants from vulnerable backgrounds as well as providing greater support to organisations that focus their activities on these target groups. The opportunities the programme can provide for young people coming from disadvantaged situations should also be promoted and made more visible. In order to enhance the inclusion measures, it would be beneficial to collect and exchange good practices among organisations both at the European and the national level.

A greater inclusion of third country participants should be considered, for example, through establishing a specific ESC visa category. Creating an ESC-specific visa category could be a way of

simplifying this process. The provision of financial and legal support connected to visa procedures should be included among the support offered under the ESC. Furthermore, the role of sending organisations should be clarified further.

A potential expansion of the age limits to include younger and older volunteers than the current 18-30 age group could facilitate greater participation.

Recommendation 5: Improve the IT and functioning of the online platform

The IT environment accompanying the ESC is deemed as highly volatile and not fit for the purpose and aims of the programme. Further investment into the user-friendliness of the online platform should be made in order to continue increasing the number of participants and funded projects. Training opportunities complemented by instructional videos on how to use the various tools should be developed to further support the usability of the online platform and the IT tools.

It would be advantageous to create a centralised platform where grant holders can upload contract amendments. Currently, this can only be done by emailing the NAs, which often leads to delays in the implementation of the projects.

Recommendation 6: Consider establishing a programme committee

A programme committee similar to the one that exists for Erasmus+ should be established. As a result of creating such a committee, political awareness of the programme and its importance to the integration of youth into society could be strengthened, which may then in turn increase awareness-raising efforts at the European and national levels.

Recommendation 7: Improve visibility of the portfolio of funded projects

The European Commission should consider increasing the transparency, searchability and findability of the funding and tender opportunities portal (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area, SEDIA) where ESC calls and funded projects are published to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse project data per programme. In its current format, very limited analysis can be carried out on Commission programme implementation, which limits the transparency of allocated funding.

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ANNEX 1: SURVEY BRIEFING – ESC

KEY FINDINGS

- There is no real consensus on the quality of the Commission's and the national agencies' communication activities, but overall, there seems to be room for improvement on both accounts.
- More positive feedback is provided on the clarity of the ESC programme announcements and calls from the NAs, but wider stakeholders are more critical. However, both NAs and wider stakeholders are relatively positive about the clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls for ESC projects.
- With regards to the evaluation process, transparency and fairness, wider stakeholders were more critical compared to NAs, which were positive about these aspects of the ESC overall.
- In terms of the programme strengths, several NAs viewed the implementation of the programme to be achieving its objectives. The ESC's content was considered to be high. The solidarity aspect also received very positive feedback, although several NAs thought that the budget is insufficient, since it does not allow for newcomers to effectively participate. NAs deemed several aspects in need of improvement. These were poor IT systems, the format of the grant agreements and the European Commission support to the NAs.
- The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery, the Russian war against Ukraine, and Brexit were all considered to be important factors, but with some mitigation measures in place. Wider stakeholders were more sceptical of the sufficiency of these measures compared to NAs.
- Only 30% of NAs were satisfied by the overall budget available in their country, while the remaining respondents indicated they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied (20%), somewhat dissatisfied (25%) or very dissatisfied (25%). Solidarity projects and to a lesser extent volunteering activities should receive an increased budget according to the NAs.
- NAs were predominantly positive about the presence of EU priorities, in particular with regards to the application process, communications and objectives of the projects. Wider stakeholders were less positive but still overall satisfied.
- Both NAs and wider stakeholders are positive that the ESC is reaching its objectives although both stakeholder groups had reservations about the progress in its implementation.
- With regards to wider stakeholders' views on the ESC funding designs, the inadequacy of the available project funding is the most striking element.
- There is a dissatisfaction with the IT tools both among NAs and among wider stakeholders.

Introduction

This document presents the survey results disseminated to the national authorities (NAs) and to wider stakeholders (which include beneficiaries and other funded stakeholders) which were involved in the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme. The survey aims to complement the report and final recommendations. The objective is to confirm and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the programme in its early phase.

The survey targeting NAs received 48 responses and the survey aimed at wider stakeholders received 38 responses.

Early implementation of the ESC programme

This section describes the results obtained for the assessment of the early implementation of the ESC programme.

When consulted about the **quality of the Commission's communication activities** on the 2021-2027 programme, the largest proportion of NAs responded favourably, with 41.4% answering to a large or very large extent. However, 37.9% of NA respondents for the ESC were less positive about the quality of the Commission's communication (responding either to a moderate extent or to a limited extent). Around one-fifth of respondents (20.7%) chose 'not applicable' on this question.

When consulted on the **quality of their own communication activities**, 58.6% of NAs answered they were satisfied with it to a large or very large extent. This question contains a degree of subjectivity, as the NAs are the ones assessing their own communications activities. However, this result indicates a recognition that there is room for improvement in their communication activities, since 20.7% of respondents indicated to a limited or moderate extent. Again, one-fifth of respondents (20.7%) chose not applicable (N/A) on the question on the quality of the NAs' communication activities.

Wider ESC stakeholders were less confident in responding to these two questions with almost half (45.9% and 47.8% respectively) choosing not applicable. Most respondents with an opinion indicated that the quality of the Commission's communication activities were moderate (23%) or limited (12.2%). For the quality of the NAs communication activities, there was no overall consensus – 21.7% were overall positive, 24.5% agreed that quality was limited or moderate. A small proportion, 5.8% of respondents, did not think communications activities from the NAs had any quality at all (i.e. were poor).

Regarding the **clarity of the ESC programme announcements and calls**, 55.2% of NAs responded that announcements were to a large or very large extent clear, and 24% were less positive. One-fifth of respondents chose N/A. In terms of the **clarity of the aims and objectives** of the ESC calls, the positive perception rises to 71.5% among the NAs.

Wider stakeholders struggled to provide an opinion on the clarity of the ESC programme announcements and calls, with 43.1% choosing N/A. Just over one-quarter of wider stakeholders (26.1%) were positive about the clarity of the Commission's calls, while 30.7% were more critical of the quality.

In line with the results of the NA survey, wider stakeholders were more positive about the clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls for ESC projects, with 40.1% agreeing they were clear to a large or very

large extent. This was a larger proportion of stakeholder compared to those who had reservations (21%). Of wider stakeholders, 38.7% responded N/A.

NA respondents thought the **clarity of the relevant funding opportunities over different ESC programmes** was somewhat lower – just under half (48.2%) were positive or very positive, and one-fifth of respondents (20.7%) chose N/A.

When asked about the **clarity of administrative requirements**, the majority of the NAs responded rather negatively, with 55.1% indicating to a limited or moderate extent or not at all. In contrast, 24.1% of NA respondents were optimistic about the clarity of administrative requirements for the ESC.

Wider stakeholders struggled to provide an opinion on the clarity of administrative requirements - 43.5% answered N/A. Of those who gave a response, 35.5% had reservations regarding the level of clarity provided, answering not at all, to a limited or moderate extent. In contrast, 21% were positive about the clarity of administrative requirements.

Only 17% of responding NAs and wider stakeholders thought that the **information required in the administrative proposal was proportional** to a very large or large extent. Most respondents overall disagreed or partially disagreed with this (58.6% for NAs and 33% for wider stakeholders – most of which (47.8%) had no opinion).

One-fifth (20.7%) of NAs thought the **user-friendliness of the proposal template** was high to a large or very large extent, whereas 55% indicated that there is room for improvement. The equivalent proportions for wider stakeholders were 22.2% and 28.6% respectively. Almost a quarter of NAs (24.1%) and half of wider stakeholders (49.2%) had no opinion.

Regarding the **adequacy of the length of ESC proposals**, only 17.2% NAs and 12.7% of wider stakeholders responded that it was adequate to a large or very large extent, and 58.6% of NAs and 36.5% of wider stakeholders responded not at all or to a limited or moderate extent.

Concerning the **evaluation process**, 58.6% of NA respondents expressed that the clarity of the information on the process was satisfactory to a large or very large extent. The view of wider ESC stakeholders was much less positive – only 18.8% agreed with this, while 32.8% of wider stakeholders indicated room for improvement. The same proportion of NAs (58.6%) also indicated that the **clarity of the award criteria described in the work programmes** was satisfactory to a large or very large extent. Again, wider stakeholders were less positive – the equivalent number was 22.2%.

The **fairness of the evaluation process** was also well regarded among NAs, with 50% responding they were satisfactory to a large or very large extent. In total, 28.6% of NA respondents indicated that there is room for improvement, and 21.4% indicated N/A. The fairness of the evaluation process was much less well-regarded among wider stakeholders – only 21% expressed that it was satisfactory to a large or very large extent.

The **transparency on the funding decisions** was also well-received by NAs, with 53.6% of NAs responding positively, although over a quarter of NAs (28.6%) saw room for improvement and 21.4% responded with N/A. Wider stakeholders were less positive – only 12.7% expressed that transparency was to a large extent satisfactory, while 36.5% indicated there was room for improvement.

As for the **completeness of the evaluation reports**, 53.6% of NAs responded positively, while 21.4% of NA respondents found it not applicable and 25.1% indicated room for improvement. Again, wider stakeholders were more critical with only 25% responding positively. Just over one-fifth (21.9%) of wider stakeholders considered the completeness of the evaluation reports for ESC to be lacking. However, 53.1% of wider stakeholders responded with N/A.

Lastly, the **timeliness of the decision-making** process was regarded as satisfactory to a large or very large extent by 40.7% of the respondents. However, 37% of responding NAs saw room for improvement, while 22.2% had no opinion or knowledge. Only 16.1% of wider stakeholders were satisfied with the timeliness, and almost one-third (32.2%) considered there to be room for improvement. However, over half (51.6%) of wider stakeholders chose N/A.

As part of the survey, NA respondents[96] were given an opportunity to comment on their **overall impression on which aspects have so far gone well** or could be improved within the programme implementation.

In terms of its strengths, several NAs viewed the implementation of the programme to be achieving its objectives. The content of the ESC was regarded as of high quality. The solidarity aspect also received very positive feedback, although it was considered by several NAs that the budget was insufficient, since it did not allow for newcomers to effectively participate.

NAs deemed several aspects in need of improvement. These were poor IT systems, the format of the grant agreements, and European Commission support to the NAs. Quotes from respondents on these issues are provided below:

- "The most problematic aspect in 2023 are new formats of grant agreements - difficult to understand, not user-friendly, not really inclusive for smaller beneficiaries and NGOs."
- "Content-wise the programmes are highly relevant, the administrative requirements and IT Tools are very problematic."
- "Heavy administrative burdens due to inefficient IT tools both for the NA and the beneficiary. Further guidance needs to be provided to the NAs on suspicious and fraud cases."

NAs and wider stakeholders were asked to determine to what extent the following external factors have impacted the implementation of the programme.

As observed in the table below, the post COVID-19 pandemic recovery is seen by NAs as having the most significant impact, with a large percentage of agencies indicating either a very large or large extent of impact. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the UK's exit from the EU also have notable impacts, albeit with more varied responses across different categories of impact.

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[96] Wider stakeholders were not asked this question.

Table 9: Extent of impact of external factors – National Agencies

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	Russia's war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
To a very large extent	**33.3%**	19.2%	3.8%
To a large extent	18.5%	3.8%	7.7%
To a moderate extent	14.8%	**30.8%**	**30.8%**
To a limited extent	7.4%	19.2%	30.8%
Not at all	0%	3.8%	3.8%
Not applicable	25.9%	23.1%	23.1%

The overall perception of the impact of external factors is similar for wider stakeholders, as shown in Table 10. However, around half of wider stakeholders responded N/A, which may indicate that they have less insight into how external factors impacted the ESC.

Table 10: Extent of impact of external factors – wider stakeholders

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	Russia's war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
To a very large extent	**24.6%**	9.1%	4.8%
To a large extent	12.3%	**19.7%**	9.5%
To a moderate extent	10.8%	9.1%	**11.1%**
To a limited extent	1.5%	10.6%	9.5%
Not at all	0%	4.5%	15.9%
Not applicable	50.8%	47.0%	49.2%

Both NAs and wider stakeholders were asked to propose other external factors impacting the implementation of the ESC. Both groups highlighted here the negative impact of high inflation and current economic problems across Europe.

Two separate respondents from the wider stakeholder group also highlighted two additional issues that they considered external factors, one regarding the administrative rules and the other regarding the Quality Label, as quoted verbatim in the box below:

> *"Red tape by the national agencies and micromanagement (inventing rules that the Commission did not set up). Lack of proportionality, forcing beneficiaries to use 13 online systems for a grant on average of EUR 13 000 . "*
>
> *"We welcome the Quality Label. We are concerned about access of this programme to European umbrella organisations who need to obtain the label through the national agency of the country where they are based."*

NA respondents were asked if the ESC programme had been adjusted to mitigate or accommodate for identified external factors. As shown in Table 11, most respondents agreed this had been done for the pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Opinion was more divided – slightly positive – for the UK's exit from the EU.

Table 11: Adjustment to accommodate for external factors – national agencies

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	Russia's war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
Yes	**73.9%**	**78.3%**	**52.4%**
No	26.1%	21.7%	47.6%

Wider stakeholders held a less optimistic view regarding the efficacy of mitigation measures. However, they did agree that measures had been put in place to address the consequences of the pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. On the other hand, wider stakeholders disagreed with national agencies' assessment that adequate steps had been taken to alleviate the impact of Brexit, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12: Adjustment to accommodate for external factors – wider stakeholders

Value	The post COVID-19 pandemic recovery	Russia's war against Ukraine	The UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit)
Yes	**68.9%**	**52.4%**	35.7%
No	31.1%	47.6%	**64.3%**

Budget and resources

This section describes the results obtained for the assessment of the budget and resources distributed under the ESC programme.

When asked if any specific measures had been put in place by the European Commission (along with executive agencies and/or national agencies) to cope with the current economic situation, just over half of NAs responded 'Yes' (54.5%) while 45.5% indicated 'No'. The most cited measures to put in place included increased unit costs for allowances, higher lump sums and flat rates.

Only 30% of NAs were satisfied by the overall budget available in their country, while the remainder indicated they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied (20%), somewhat dissatisfied (25%) or very dissatisfied (25%). Solidarity projects and, to a lesser extent, volunteering activities should receive an increased budget, according to the NAs.

NAs were additionally asked to determine to what extent they considered the current programme processes to be simpler (in terms of proposal and grant preparation) and timely (in terms of grant) compared to previous programmes, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13: Comparison between 2021-2027 and previous programmes – National Agencies

Value	The processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The processes of grant preparation in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The time from submitting the application to receiving the grant has substantially improved compared to the 2014-2020
Fully agree	4.5%	0%	13.6%
Partly agree	**27.3%**	9.1%	0%
Neither agree nor disagree.	22.7%	9.1%	**27.3%**

Partly disagree	18.2%	**40.9%**	**27.3%**
Fully disagree	4.5%	18.2%	9.1%
Don't know	22.7%	22.7%	22.7%

As shown in the table, there is no consensus on the progress of the ESC programme in becoming more efficient and user friendly compared to previous iterations. Some NA opinions are also negative, with dissatisfaction expressed over the processes of grant preparation as well as the timing of the grants in 2021-2027.

These views are reflected to a lesser extent in the responses received by wider stakeholders to the same questions (Table 14). Wider stakeholders indicate that the processes to conduct the proposal preparation, submission and grant preparations have improved, while the time to award grants has not improved.

Table 14: Comparison between 2021-2027 and previous programmes – wider stakeholders

Value	The processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The processes of grant preparation in 2021-2027 are simpler than those in 2014-2020	The time from submitting the application to receiving the grant has substantially improved compared to the 2014-2020
Fully agree	**18.2%**	**16.3%**	9.5%
Partly agree	15.9%	**16.3%**	4.8%
Neither agree nor disagree.	9.1%	11.6%	14.3%
Partly disagree	6.8%	4.7%	**16.7%**
Fully disagree	4.5%	2.3%	4.8%
Don't know	45.5%	48.8%	50.0%

Wider stakeholders were also asked what single measure could be implemented to improve the ESC application and grant process. Open responses received on this question included:

- A centralised platform for inputting amendments, as currently ESC grant holders must submit this information via email to their NAs. This causes delays in project implementation.
- The amount of maximum funding for a single organisation within the ESC should be increased, since it would enable more professional implementation of the projects.

Wider stakeholders were also asked to what extent they agree that the funding available is sufficiently flexible to allow the project activities to be carried out. As seen in Figure 7, 43% of respondents confirmed this to be the case to a large or very large extent, while the remaining 57% disagreed to a varying level.

Figure 7: Extent to which ESC funding available is sufficiently flexible to allow for the project activities to be carried out n=42
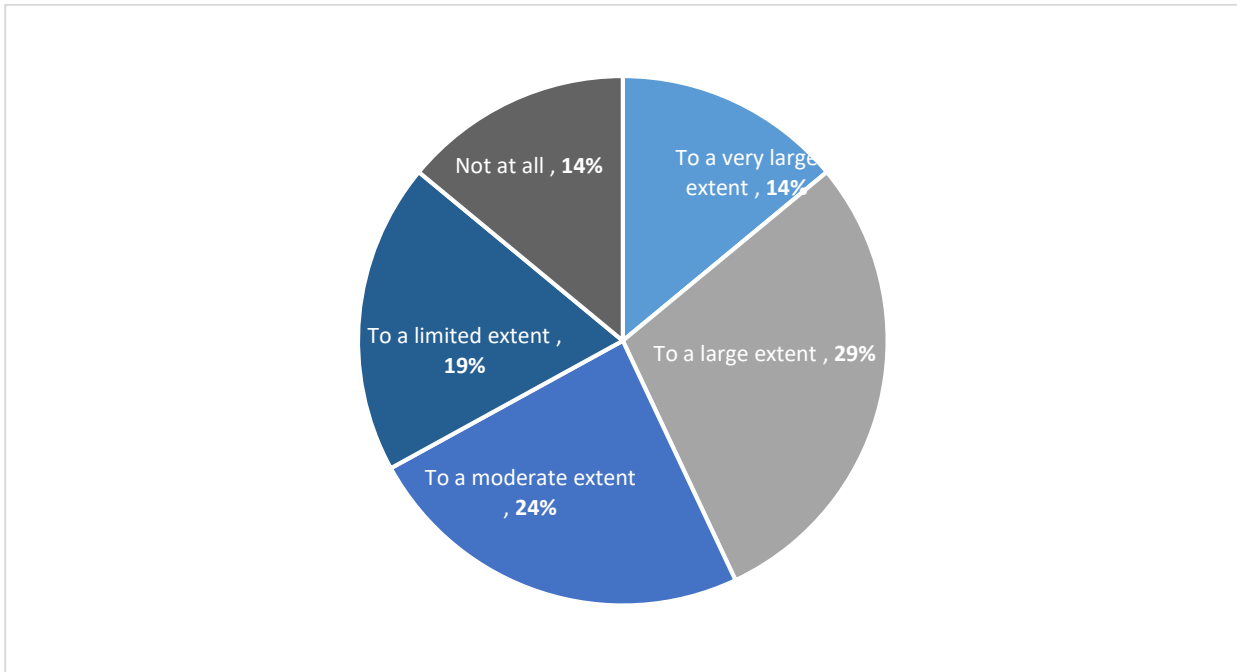
When asked to elaborate on the funding conditions through an open question, wider stakeholders indicated that:

- ESC grant contracts are produced slowly which impedes the level of flexibility during the early stages of the projects.
- The use of lump sums is very helpful to reduce the beneficiaries' administrative burden.
- There are no clear rules on how support measures for inclusion can be used. Therefore, it is hard to implement additional measures to support participants.

Wider stakeholders were also asked if any specific measures to cope with the current economic situation and inflation were incorporated by the European Commission and/or executive agencies and/or national agencies. On this question, 40.5% responded 'Yes' and 59.5% responded 'No'. Of the stakeholders who indicated 'Yes', the following examples of measures implemented were given:

- Increased lump sums
- Funding schemes adjusted to inflation
- Increased allowances

While stakeholders acknowledged the implementation of measures to provide financial support to ESC beneficiaries, there was a prevailing sense that additional efforts were required. One stakeholder said: "The lump sums were increased, but the budget was then extremely reduced. In order to still be able

to implement the planned projects profitably, the increased flat rates (with the exception of pocket money) cannot be passed on to the young people in the form of increases in food allowances etc., but must be used to finance the duration of the activities."

Overall, the feedback from wider stakeholders was fairly negative when they were asked about their level of satisfaction with the budget distribution and financial management at the programme level (see Figure 7).

Figure 8: Level of satisfaction with the budget distribution and financial management at the programme level? N=39
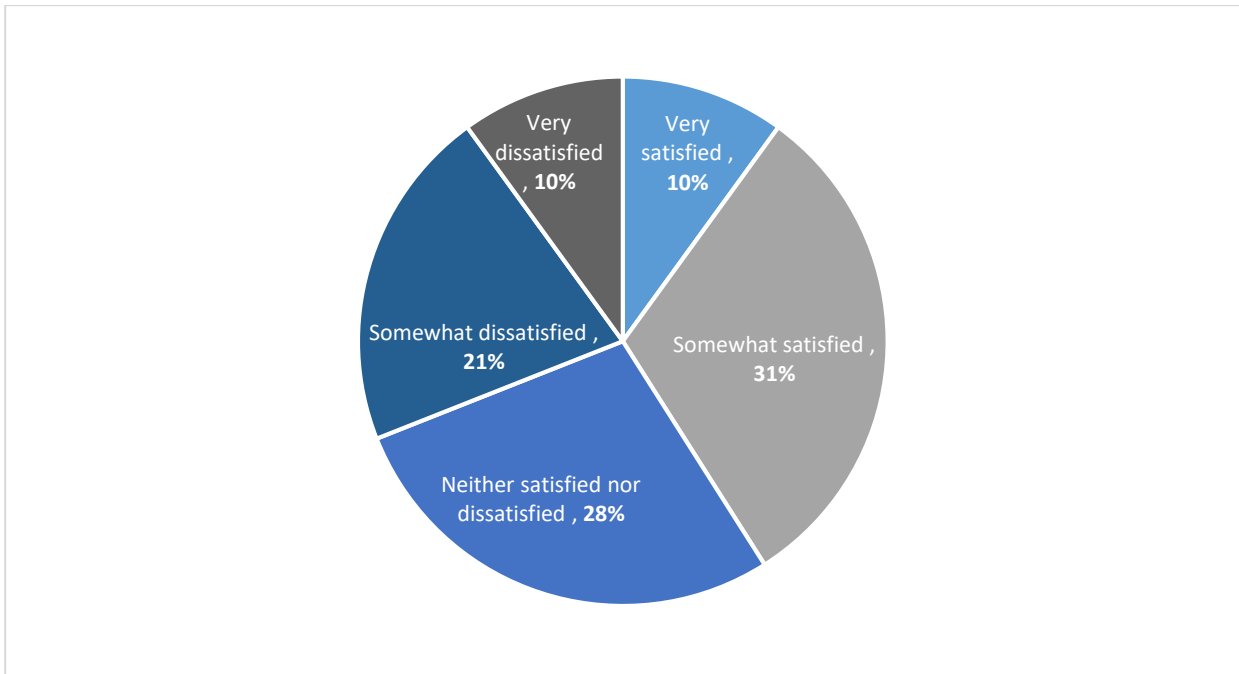
EU priorities

This section describes the results obtained for evaluating the presence of EU priorities (Green Deal, digital transformation, and gender equality) within the ESC programme.

At a general level, NAs were asked to consider the extent to which the priorities of the Green Deal, digital transformation, and gender equality were present within the aspects of the ESC programme detailed in Table 15.

Table 15: Extent to which EU priorities (Green Deal, digital transformation, gender equality) are present in each of the following aspects of the ESC programme – national agencies

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	19.0%	19.0%	23.8%	9.5%
To a large extent	**42.9%**	**33.3%**	**47.6%**	28.6%
To a moderate extent	9.5%	23.8%	4.8%	**33.3%**
To a limited extent	14.3%	9.5%	9.5%	9.5%
Not at all	4.8%	14.3%	4.8%	4.8%
Don't know	9.5%	19.0%	9.5%	14.3%

For the ESC, NAs were predominantly positive about the presence of the priorities, in particular with regards to the application process, communications and objectives of the projects.

NA respondents were asked to propose how the priorities could be better integrated and the following feedback was received by the NAs.

- There needs to be more awareness/campaigns and dissemination of good practices on such measures, both at the EC and national levels.
- It is important to approach inclusion differently, rather than relying on a questionnaire at the end where young people may not know how to evaluate themselves. Inclusion measures should be within the competence of the organisations, allowing them to ask for a budget beforehand.

Wider stakeholders were also asked to what extent the policies of Green Deal, the digital transformation and gender equality were reflected throughout the programme. For the aspects under consideration, overall they responded "to a moderate extent" across all three (see Tables 16, 17 and 18).

Table 16: Extent to which Green Deal priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the ESC programme – wider stakeholders.

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	7.9%	7.7%	5.0%	5.0%
To a large extent	13.2%	12.8%	**22.5%**	10.0%
To a moderate extent	**26.3%**	**25.6%**	20.0%	**25.0%**
To a limited extent	5.3%	5.1%	5.0%	12.5%
Not at all	2.6%	5.1%	0%	0%
Don't know	44.7%	43.6%	47.5%	47.5%

Table 17: Extent to which digital transformation priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the ESC programme – wider stakeholders.

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	7.5%	4.9%	4.9%	4.9%
To a large extent	12.5%	9.8%	12.2%	7.3%
To a moderate extent	**17.5%**	**29.3%**	**26.8%**	**26.8%**
To a limited extent	15.0%	12.2%	9.8%	14.6%
Not at all	2.5%	0%	2.4%	2.4%
Don't know	45.0%	43.9%	43.9%	43.9%

Table 18: Extent to which gender equality priorities are present in each of the following aspects of the ESC programme – wider stakeholders.

Value	Application process	Communications	Goals and objectives of the projects	Evaluation process
To a very large extent	7.5%	7.5%	5.0%	5.0%
To a large extent	5.0%	5.0%	12.5%	7.5%
To a moderate extent	**25.0%**	**17.5%**	**22.5%**	**22.5%**
To a limited extent	15.0%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Not at all	2.5%	12.5%	2.5%	7.5%
Don't know	45.0%	47.5%	47.5%	47.5%

Wider stakeholders were also asked an open question on the extent to which the Green Deal, digital transformation and gender priorities are addressed by the ESC programme and what could be done to improve integration. Respondents suggested including green incentives to encourage ESC beneficiaries to choose not just green options for travel but also for accommodation and subsistence (such as accommodations that use solar energy as the primary source of electricity or locally sourced food with a low environmental impact). This would, however, require specific funding.

Other wider stakeholders were more critical about the inclusion of the Green Deal, digital transformation, and gender priorities in the programme, suggesting it was "difficult to answer because all beneficiaries have differing needs" or that the programme beneficiaries should not be "forced" to take up these priorities.

Effectiveness & added value

This section describes the results obtained for the questions on effectiveness and added value of the ESC programme.

Around 64% of the NAs argued that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives to a large or very large extent, while 22.7% considered this not be the case to a moderate or limited extent.

The aspects that were considered to be particularly successful within the NA's country for the ESC included:

- Inclusion and green priorities.
- The Quality Label.
- The demand from applicants.
- Solidarity projects.
- Hosting volunteers, both individual and team projects.
- Reacting to different challenges by organisations involved in volunteering and solidarity projects.
- The motivation of NGOs to accept ESC volunteers.
- Micro-grants under transnational cooperation activities/networking activities in the European Year of Youth.

With regards to general shortcomings in the implementation of the ESC programme, the NAs provided the following comments:

- Lack of budget to meet demand.
- Seminars for volunteers do not have enough content and are too long.
- Poorly designed or overly complex IT tools systems and the need to make the application process easier.

Wider stakeholders were also asked questions on the programme's effectiveness so far, including the extent to which it is reaching its objectives. As seen in Table 19, the response was quite positive. This perspective arises despite the group's general reservations about the implementation process. This outcome may reflect stakeholders' belief that the ESC programme meets genuine needs and is highly relevant.

Table 19: Extent to which the ESC programme has contributed to the following objectives – wider stakeholders

Value	Increased citizens' engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union and exchanges between citizens of different Member States	Promoted inclusion and diversity	Promoted young people's participation in democratic processes and civic engagement	Increased communities' strength and resilience	Increased non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people
To a very large extent	**26.5%**	**26.5%**	**29.4%**	**23.5%**	**41.2%**
To a large extent	20.6%	23.5%	23.5%	11.8%	8.8%
To a moderate extent	8.8%	5.9%	5.9%	17.6%	8.8%
To a limited extent	2.9%	2.9%	0%	5.9%	0%
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Don't know	41.2%	41.2%	41.2%	41.2%	41.2%

Moreover, Figure 9 below shows a positive perception among wider stakeholders that their projects are on track to deliver their objectives.

Figure 9: Extent to which ESC projects are on track to deliver their objectives? – wider stakeholders n=36
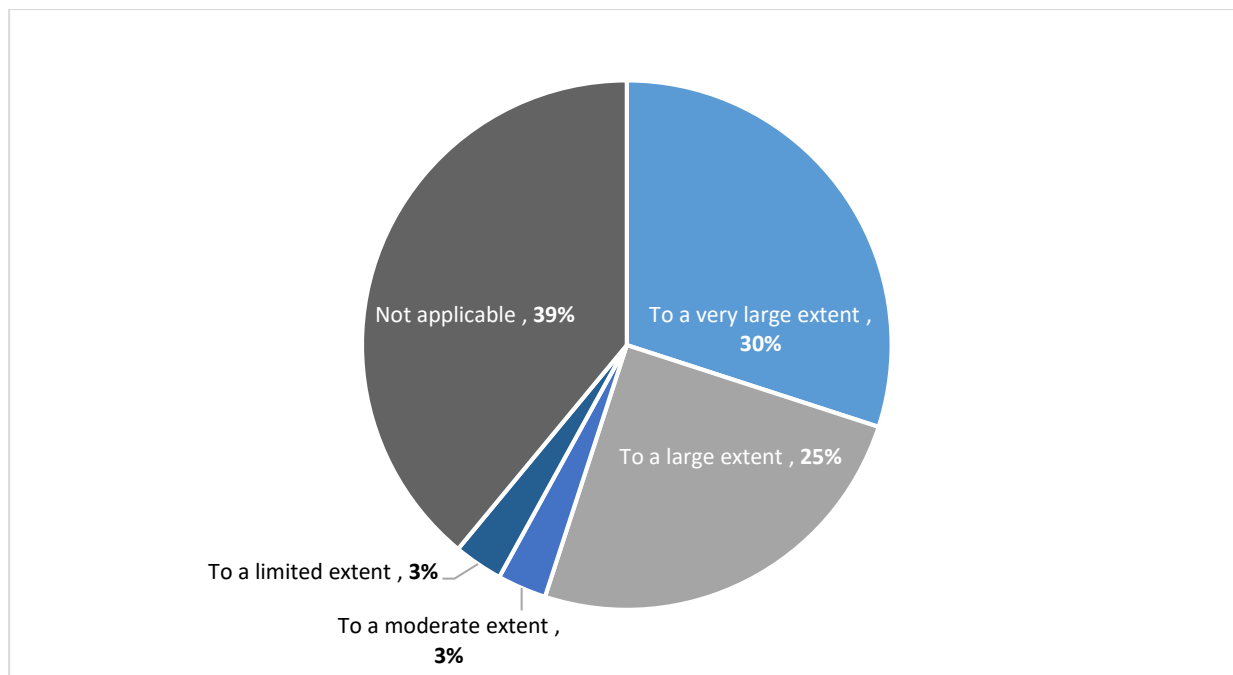
Application process

Wider stakeholders were also asked specific questions on their experience and perception of the ESC application process (Table 20). The user-friendliness of the contracting procedures and tools seems to be the most contentious area where wider stakeholders did not find consensus. This indicates that some stakeholders might have found the process straightforward and intuitive, while others experienced difficulties or complexities. The lack of agreement suggests the need for improvements in this area to ensure a consistent experience for all stakeholders.

The timeliness and proportionality of administrative and legal requirements were generally viewed more positively, suggesting that these aspects are relatively well managed. However, a considerable number of respondents indicated that they do not know.

Table 20: Extent to which the contracting and administrative designs are appropriate – wider stakeholders

Value	The contracting procedures and tools were user-friendly	The contracting procedures were managed in a timely manner	The administrative and legal requirements were proportionate to the time needed for complying with them
Fully agree	0%	**16.3%**	11.9%
Partly agree	**20.9%**	**16.3%**	**19.0%**
Neither agree nor disagree	9.3%	9.3%	16.7%
Partly disagree	16.3%	11.6%	4.8%
Fully disagree	**20.9%**	9.3%	9.5%
Don't know	32.6%	37.2%	38.1%

Table 21 shows the results of wider stakeholders' views on the ESC funding designs. The most notable concern is the insufficient size of the available project funding, with 38.1% of respondents partially or fully agreeing that it is inadequate.

Table 21: Extent to which the funding designs are appropriate – wider stakeholders

Value	The funding schemes were clear	The funding schemes were adequate for the needs of my project	The size of the project funding was adequate.	The project duration was sufficient	It was sufficiently flexible in adapting the project objectives because of changed circumstances	It was sufficiently flexible with respect to changes in the project consortium
Fully agree	11.6%	9.3%	9.5%	**26.2%**	14.0%	11.6%
Partly agree	**25.6%**	**18.6%**	9.5%	19.0%	**27.9%**	14.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	11.6%	9.3%	7.1%	9.5%	14.0%	**16.3%**
Partly disagree	11.6%	14.0%	**23.8%**	4.8%	4.7%	2.3%
Fully disagree	7.0%	16.3%	**14.3%**	4.8%	2.3%	2.3%
Don't know	32.6%	32.6%	35.7%	35.7%	37.2%	53.5%

Wider stakeholders who selected 'neither agree nor disagree', 'partly disagree', or 'fully disagree' to any of the previous questions were invited to explain why. Comments on this point included:

- Significant issues exist over the IT tools functionality for project application and administration, resulting in delays and confusion.
- Concerns exist about the allocation of funds, with a perception that preference is given to larger organisations over impactful projects.
- A negative impact was felt due to the decision to discontinue organisations' ability to organise seminars for their volunteers in long-term voluntary service.
- Delays in project acceptance confirmation and funding contract issuance complicate financial planning.
- Contracts and funding arrive after project periods start, requiring pre-financing and exposing organisations to risks.
- Technical problems with IT tools have been experienced, and the ESC rates do not cover additional benefits for volunteers (such as in-person language courses or quality materials for personal projects).
- The administrative burden is high and undermines theoretical flexibility.
- Not enough application deadlines for solidarity projects hinder planning for young people.

- There is a need for shorter projects to have simpler application conditions.

Wider stakeholders were asked if there are any aspects that they consider to be a shortcoming compared to other EU funding programmes, and on this question 32% responded 'Yes', while 68% indicated 'No'.

Wider stakeholders were invited to elaborate on their response through an open question. Comments on this point included:

- There is no EU-level programme committee for ESC, and it lacks the same political attention as Erasmus+.
- Excessive bureaucracy and stringent rules for minor funding amounts are discouraging for small organisations.
- There needs to be more funding support for lead organisations, as the management work involved is substantial.
- More funding and a dedicated TEC (Transnational Exchange of Experts and Coordinators) are needed for ESC.
- Despite significant interest, financial limitations of beneficiaries hinder further programme promotion and additional activities.

Further questions posed to wider stakeholders concerned the costs and benefits of developing a proposal for an ESC project. Figure 10 provides an indication of the amount of effort a proposal requires from an applicant organisation in terms of person-days. In total, 45% of respondents indicated that a proposal can be developed in less than 15 person days, while 16% indicated it takes more than 30 person days. However, the responses do not reflect the different kinds of grants applied for.

Figure 10: In applicants' estimation, how much effort does the proposal require from an applicant organisation in terms of person-days? n=31
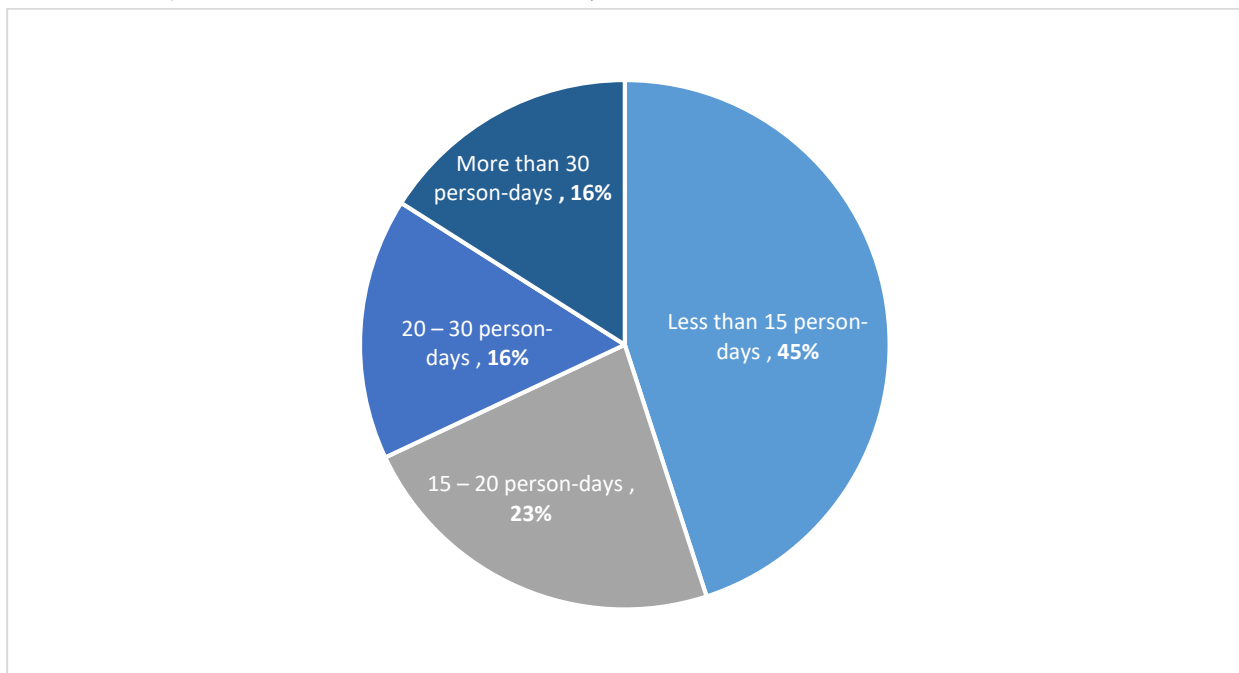
Wider stakeholders are also relatively positive about the efforts versus rewards of applying for a grant under the ESC, as outlined in Table 22. However, many wider stakeholders that participated in the survey selected the 'don't know' option for this question. Indeed, feedback from wider stakeholders

submitted through the ESC call for evidence slightly contradicts these results, as many stakeholders emphasised that the efforts needed to apply are not proportionate to the organisation's requirements to implement the projects.

Table 22: Perception of the efforts needed to apply to the ESC programme – wider stakeholders

Value	The efforts needed were proportionate to the volume of funding requested	The efforts needed were proportionate to the complexity of the proposed project	The efforts needed were proportionate taking into consideration the number of partners involved	The efforts needed were proportionate to the strategic relevance/ interest in the topic/research	The efforts needed were not in proportion with the low chances of funding
To a very large extent	**21.2%**	16.1%	12.5%	**18.8%**	16.1%
To a large extent	9.1%	**19.4%**	**21.9%**	12.5%	3.2%
To a moderate extent	18.2%	12.9%	18.8%	15.6%	**19.4%**
To a limited extent	9.1%	12.9%	6.3%	6.3%	6.5%
Not at all	12.1%	6.5%	9.4%	12.5%	12.9%
Don't know	30.3%	32.3%	31.3%	34.4%	41.9%

Wider stakeholders were also asked about the extent to which the two-stage proposal process substantially improved the efficiency of the proposal process for their organisation. The feedback is somewhat inconclusive, with over two-thirds of responses indicating that they do not know. However, among those with an opinion, the overall impression is positive.

Figure 11: Extent to which the two-stage proposal process substantially improved the efficiency of the proposal process for my organisation – wider stakeholders n=31
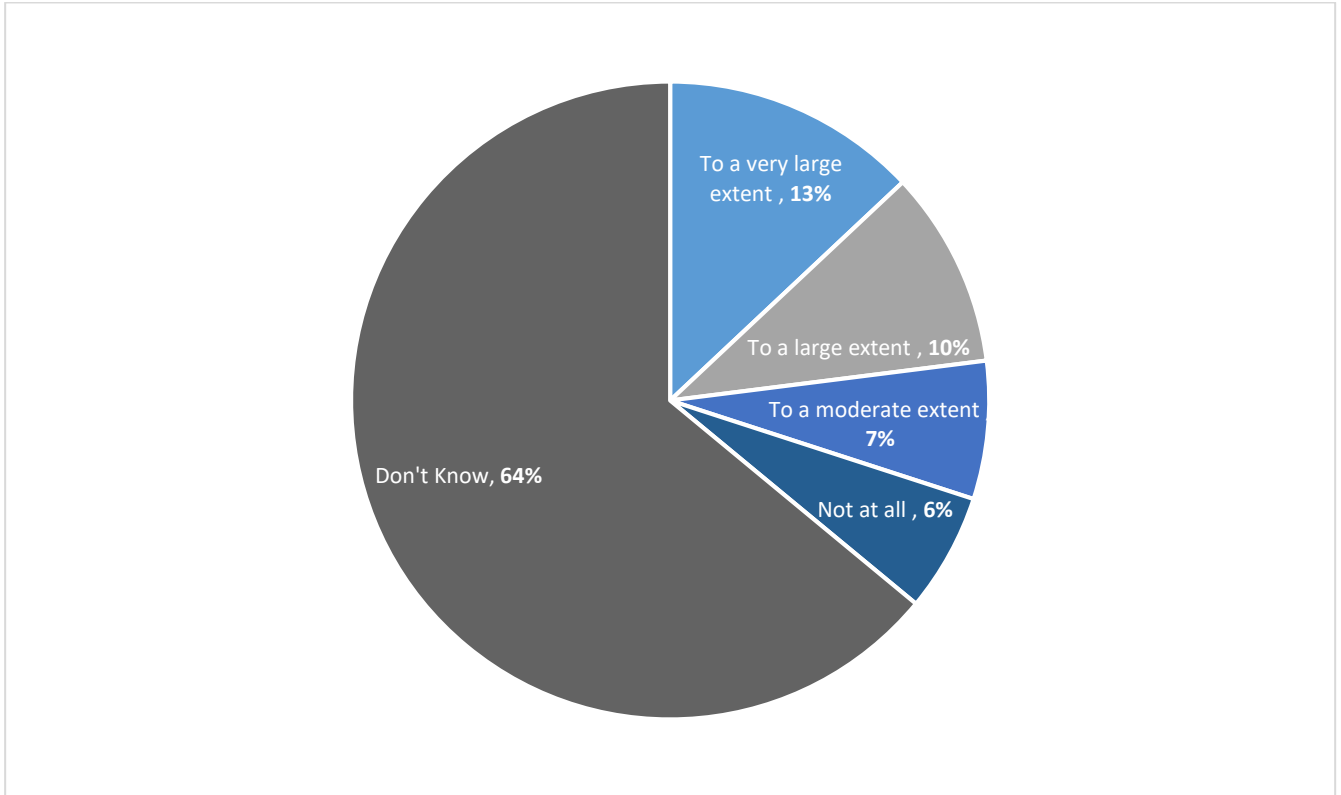
Digitalisation and IT tools

This section describes the results obtained in relation to the digitalisation and IT tools used by applicants of the ESC programme.

As shown in Table 23, the IT tools seem to be an overall dissatisfactory aspect among ESC NAs. By taking into account those who partially and fully disagree, around 55% of the NAs considered the IT tools used for the application process of the programme not user-friendly. Similarly, 45% of the NAs deemed the IT tools to complicate the beneficiaries' application process. Only 15% of the authorities considered the IT tools to be partially user-friendly within the application process.

Table 23: Extent to which IT tools are deemed to be effective – national agencies

Value	The IT tools for the application process are user-friendly	The IT tools used in the application process helped with the administrative tasks	The IT tools are in the preferred language of the applicants	The IT tools make it easy to apply	The reporting platforms are user-friendly	The reporting requirements for the project management/ monitoring are proportionate
Fully agree	0%	0%	20.0%	5.0%	0%	0%
Partly agree	25.0%	**30.0%**	**30.0%**	15.0%	15.0%	**31.6%**
Neither agree nor disagree	10.0%	15.0%	10.0%	15.0%	0%	10.5%
Partly disagree	**30.0%**	15.0%	5.0%	**40.0%**	**25.0%**	26.3%
Fully disagree	25.0%	**30.0%**	20.0%	15.0%	45.0%	21.1%
Don't know	10.0%	10.0%	15.0%	10.0%	15.0%	10.5%

A specific comment from a NA on the IT tools suggested that "there are too many technical errors, and it takes too long to resolve them. Our national agency is waiting sometimes for many months until the IT Tool (Beneficiary Module) is programmed. Sometimes the reporting deadline is near and there is still no reporting form on the Erasmus+ Beneficiary Module. Or in ESC we sometimes cannot retrieve the data from the EYP so the volunteer is not in the Beneficiary Module and has no insurance coverage... So, these processes should urgently be improved."

The dissatisfaction with IT tools is also reflected in the responses received from wider stakeholders, displayed below in Table 24.

Table 24: Extent to which IT tools are deemed to be effective – wider stakeholders

Value	The IT tools for the application process are user-friendly	The IT tools used in the application process helped with the administrative tasks	The IT tools are in the preferred language of the applicants	The IT tools make it easy to apply	The reporting platforms are user-friendly	The reporting requirements for the project management/ monitoring are proportionate
Fully agree	6.3%	3.1%	**28.1%**	3.1%	3.2%	3.1%
Partly agree	18.8%	15.6%	25.0%	18.8%	19.4%	9.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	3.1%	3.1%	12.5%	9.4%	0%	15.6%
Partly disagree	15.6%	21.9%	3.1%	12.5%	19.4%	**21.9%**
Fully disagree	**31.3%**	**28.1%**	3.1%	**28.1%**	**22.6%**	15.6%
Don't know	25.0%	28.1%	28.1%	28.1%	35.5%	34.4%

Wider stakeholders were also asked a question on the extent to which the Online Language Support and the Quality Label were deemed to be effective. Table 25 indicates that there are issues with both.

Table 25: Extent to which OLS and QL are deemed to be effective – wider stakeholders

Value	Online Language Support (OLS) effectively improves participants' knowledge of the language to make the most out of this experience	The OLS courses are interactive and tailor-made	The Quality Label (QL) application process is clear and straightforward	The Quality Label is effective in connecting organisations with volunteers
Fully agree	0%	0%	6.1%	9.4%
Partly agree	6.5%	0%	**24.2%**	9.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	3.2%	6.7%	6.1%	**18.8%**
Partly disagree	**25.8%**	13.3%	15.2%	6.3%
Fully disagree	**25.8%**	**30.0%**	15.2%	15.6%
Don't know	38.7%	50.0%	33.3%	40.6%

Similarly, wider stakeholders were asked a question on the extent to which the Beneficiary Module and the Project Management Module were deemed to be effective. Table 26 indicates a level of dissatisfaction with these tools too.

Table 26: Extent to which BM and PMM are deemed to be effective – wider stakeholders

Value	The Beneficiary Module (BM) effectively supports the monitoring of the project's progress and budget	The Beneficiary Module (BM) is user-friendly	The Project Management Module (PMM) is an effective project management tool	The Project Management Module (PMM) is user-friendly
Fully agree	12.5%	6.3%	3.2%	3.2%
Partly agree	12.5%	9.4%	3.2%	3.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	9.4%	15.6%	**19.4%**	**12.9%**
Partly disagree	12.5%	6.3%	0%	3.2%
Fully disagree	**15.6%**	**28.1%**	16.1%	**12.9%**
Don't know	37.5%	34.4%	58.1%	64.5%

In essence, wider stakeholders' feedback on the IT tools raises concerns related to outdated and problematic IT tools, including issues with usability, accuracy and stability, as well as challenges related to administrative tasks and duplication of efforts.

Conclusions

The main final conclusions from the ESC survey results are summarised below.

Early implementation of the ESC programme

There is no real consensus on the quality of the Commission's and the national agencies' communication activities, but overall, there seems to be room for improvement on both accounts.

NAs' feedback on the clarity of the ESC programme announcements and calls is overall positive. However, wider stakeholders are more critical. Altogether both groups are relatively positive about the clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls for ESC projects.

When asked about the clarity of administrative requirements, the majority of the NA responded rather negatively. Wider stakeholders had reservations about the clarity of requirements too.

With regards to the evaluation process, transparency and fairness, wider stakeholders were more critical compared to NAs, which were overall positive about these aspects of the ESC.

In terms of the programme strengths, several NAs viewed the implementation of the programme to be achieving its objectives. The ESC's content was considered to be of high quality The solidarity aspect also received very positive feedback, although it was considered by several NAs that the budget was insufficient since it did not allow for newcomers to effectively participate.

NAs deemed several aspects in need of improvement. These were poor IT systems, the format of the grant agreements, and the European Commission's support to the NAs.

The post COVID-19 pandemic recover, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Brexit were all considered to be important factors, but with some mitigation measures in place. Wider stakeholders were more sceptical about the sufficiency of these measures compared to NAs.

The varying perspectives between NAs and wider stakeholders indicate that there might be differing expectations and viewpoints within those involved in the ESC programme.

Budget and resources

Only 30% of NAs were satisfied by the overall budget available in their country, while the remainder indicated they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied (20%), somewhat dissatisfied (25%) or very dissatisfied (25%). Solidarity projects and to a lesser extent volunteering activities should receive an increased budget according to the NAs.

There is no consensus on the progress of the ESC programme in becoming more efficient and user-friendly compared to previous iterations. Some NA opinions are also negative, with dissatisfaction expressed over the processes of grant preparation as well as the timing of the grants in 2021-2027.

These views are reflected to a lesser extent in the responses received by wider stakeholders to the same questions. Wider stakeholders indicate that the processes to conduct the proposal preparation and submission and the processes of grant preparations have improved, while the time to award grants has not.

EU priorities

NAs were predominantly positive about the presence of EU priorities, in particular with regards to the application process, communications and objectives of the projects. Wider stakeholders were less positive but still overall satisfied.

Effectiveness & added value

Both NAs and wider stakeholders are positive that the ESC is reaching its objectives despite both stakeholder groups' reservations about the extent of progress on implementation. Aspects that were particularly deemed to be successful within the NA's country for the ESC included:

- Inclusion and green priorities.
- The Quality Label.
- The demand from applicants.
- Solidarity projects.
- Hosting volunteers, both individual and team projects.
- Reacting to different challenges by organisation involved in both, volunteering and solidarity projects.
- The motivation of NGOs to accept ESC volunteers.
- Micro-grants under transnational cooperation activities/networking activities in the European Year of Youth.

Application process

Wider stakeholders were also asked specific questions on their experience and perception of the ESC application process. The user-friendliness of the contracting procedures and tools seems to be the most contentious area, with wider stakeholders failing to find consensus. The timeliness and proportionality of administrative and legal requirements were regarded as somewhat more positive.

With regards to wider stakeholders' views on the ESC funding designs, the inadequacy of the project funding available is the most striking element.

Digitalisation and IT tools

There is a high level of dissatisfaction with the IT tools both among NAs and among wider stakeholders.

ANNEX 2: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

A small number of semi-structured interviews were carried out as part of this study. The interviews were designed to support the development and validation of recommendations. Stakeholders consulted have been anonymised. The type of stakeholder group is indicated in the left-hand column.

Table 27: Anonymised list of stakeholders interviewed

Stakeholder type	Date of interview
Umbrella civil society organisation	4 July 2023
Civil Society organisation	4 July 2023
Civil Society organisation	17 July 2023

This study analyses the European Solidarity Corps programme 2021-2027. It covers the early implementation of the programme and provides a description of barriers identified. The main finding is that the implementation of ESC programme has been deemed fairly successful overall, however, with a number of challenges to be addressed. The study concludes with a set of recommendations.