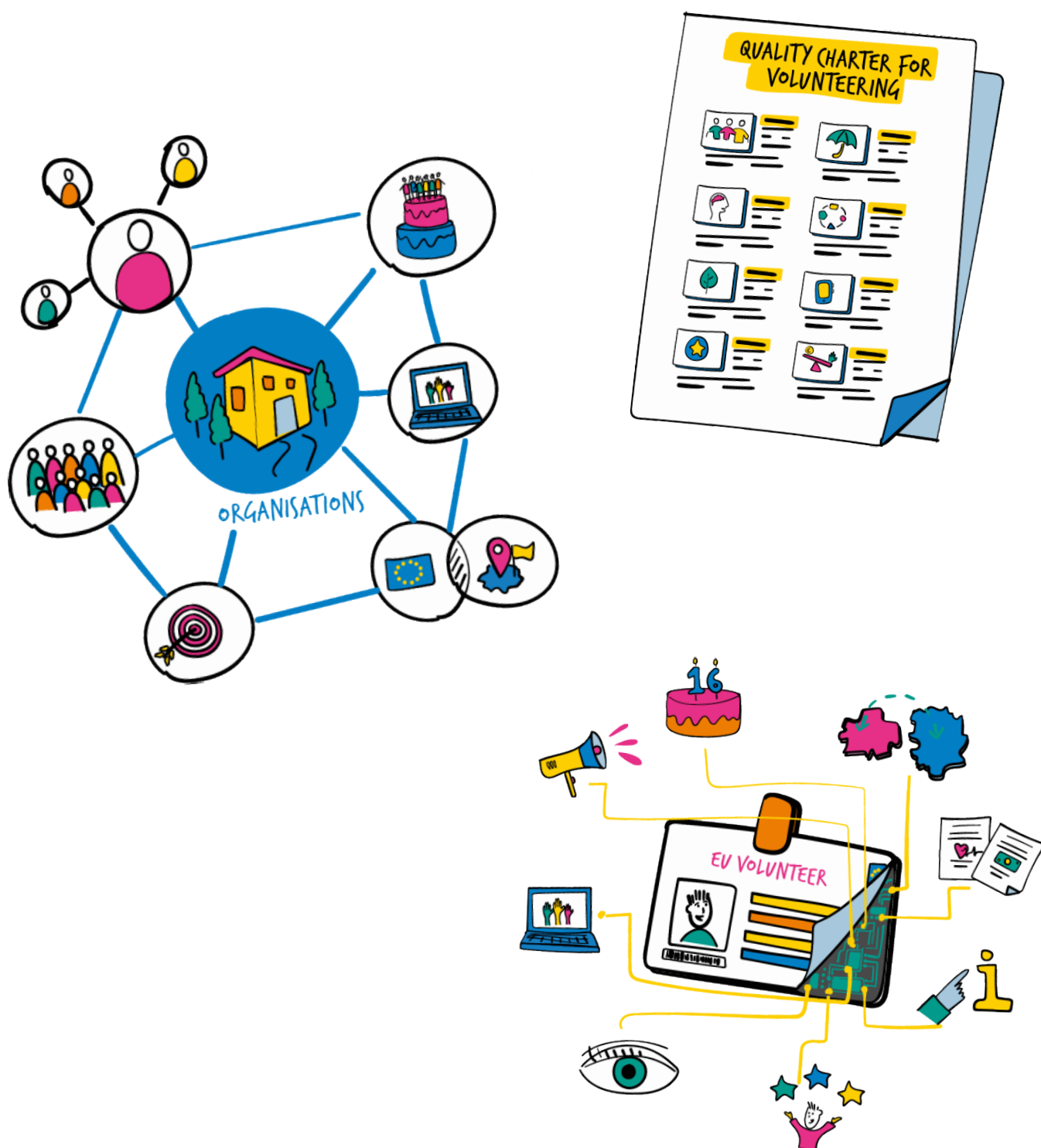


Better Conditions for Youth Volunteering



Better Conditions for Youth Volunteering

A strategic cooperation

National Agencies implementing the European Solidarity Corps (NAs) are working together¹ to help improve volunteering and engagement in Europe. A core goal is to support implementation of the Council Recommendation on mobility of young volunteers across the EU². We are convinced that the programme could provide the opportunity to deploy the Council Recommendations' ambitions. The results could be streamlined to other European volunteering programmes in the future.

Funding youth volunteering

Currently, the most powerful instrument for transnational volunteering in Europe is the European Solidarity Corps programme. To be able to reach the ambitious targets for volunteering in Europe, it is crucial to ensure sufficient resources and strengthen the programme to act as a blueprint for wider dissemination. With the start of the latest financial period, the European Solidarity Corps budget has suffered an actual reduction in available funds. The provided project budgets are picked up by organisations to 100% in a majority of National Agencies³ while good applications need to be turned down. Once adequate financial resources are ensured, the European Solidarity Corps can grow and become a major instrument for supporting the implementation of the Council Recommendation.

Implementing recommendations

While the Council Recommendation focus on nine main recommendations (plus one on monitoring the progress) to the Member States, the accompanying Staff Working Document by the European Commission (2022) includes 15 Expert Policy Recommendations in three areas: 1) Participants, 2) Processes and 3) Organisational frameworks. The proposed approach relies on both documents.

Advancing volunteering conditions

While many topics are equally important to tackle, the partnership of NAs identifies three proposals – one for each of the three areas above – that have enormous potential to help advancing the conditions for volunteering in conjunction with the European Solidarity Corps programme:

1. introduce an **"EU Volunteer"** status to better conditions for **participants**,
2. introduce a renewed **"quality charter"** for volunteering to improve **processes** around volunteering,
3. foster **capacity building** to enhance **organisational frameworks**.

For each of the three proposals, details are laid out in "Detailed Proposals" section.

¹ The framework of this cooperation is a Strategic National Agencies' Cooperation on Volunteering (SNAC Volunteering) where over ten National Agencies actively work together until 2027 on Volunteering and Solidarity.

² While the Council Recommendation focusses on transnational volunteering, the scope of the cooperation also encompasses in-country-volunteering with a European dimension, as it is practised as part of the European Solidarity Corps programme especially through the solidarity projects.

³ According to the latest information by the European Commission.

Continuing a solidarity-based programme

Focus on solidarity

Facing several crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing effects on young people, the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the climate crisis, European values are under observation, and the European Solidarity Corps programme with its solidarity focus provides tools and answers. The programme puts solidarity and community impact at its heart and this is the primary motivation for engaging in the programme. It widens the scope of solidarity from local engagement initiatives (Solidarity projects) to volunteering across Europe and beyond (Humanitarian Aid Volunteering). The learning within the programme is mainly value-based and takes place within this context. The programme offers unique opportunities for Europe's youth to shape the future and tackle the challenges facing the continent.

Strengthening civil society

It opens possibilities to different beneficiary organisations compared to Erasmus+ youth and includes a wider share of the civil society sector, social entrepreneurs, environmental organisations, municipalities and the entire volunteering field. Since its start in 2018, the programme has proven very beneficial⁴ in fostering solidarity for organisations, youth work and young people, in general. Building on this experience, the programme has enormous potential to become larger, stronger, more visible and impactful – all of these provided adequate financial resources are being made available and participation remains accessible for newcomer organisations.

New potentials

Building on past experience in implementing the European Solidarity Corps programme, interest for digital volunteering or blended/ hybrid volunteering has risen and a future programme should respond to the increased need of such opportunities. Parts of the programme, above all, engagement in solidarity projects, should moreover be made available to participants below 18 years of age. While mentioning possibilities for a growing programme, the top priority is adequately increasing funds for actions currently in place.

A value-based programme

The decision on whether the European Solidarity Corps programme will remain a stand-alone programme has not yet been made at the point of drafting this paper. As NAs, we see an added value in having a value-based programme that puts solidarity at the heart of volunteerism, involves a wider scope of organisations and has great potential to be further developed and expanded based on the experience made since 2018. Whatever the decision will be, these merits⁵ should not be jeopardised.

4 Cf., e.g. RAY (2019): *Exploring the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first year*, p. 25. and European Commission (2023): *European Solidarity Corps - Performance*.

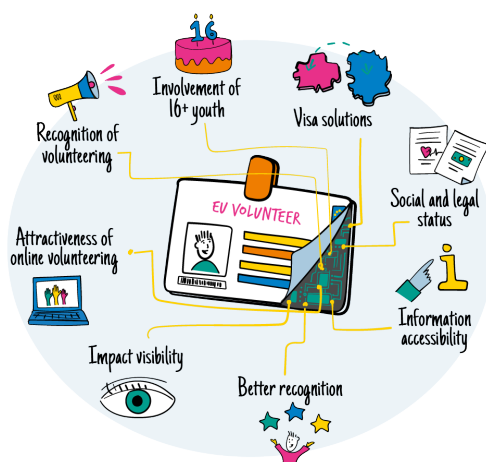
5 For more information on the added value of the European Solidarity Corps programme, see the section "Specific analysis of complementarity of all strands of ESC and Erasmus+ (KA1 and KA2) projects" in the research paper: <https://bit.ly/complementarities-synergies-SNAC-research>

A new perspective for neighbouring partner regions

The importance of promoting peace, democracy, and human rights in the neighbouring partner regions of the EU has been reinforced in the light of recent crises. At the same time, international volunteers coming from the neighbouring regions foster important processes, such as intercultural learning, awareness and respect of pluralism and diversity, critical thinking and a stronger interest in democratic citizenship and human rights issues inside the EU. Transnational volunteering can therefore play an important role in increasing cohesion among EU Member States and neighbouring partner countries. In both, there is enormous interest by organisations and individuals to participate in transnational volunteering programmes. Nevertheless, the conditions have gradually worsened in the past years and led to a sense of imbalance in power dynamics between programme and partner countries. Visa obstacles persisted or worsened in many cases. In line with the first Youth Action Plan in EU External Action to strengthen engagement with young people worldwide published in 2022, investment in a growing volunteering programme that includes neighbouring partner countries as full-fledged partners would be extremely beneficial.

Detailed Proposals

1. Introduce an “EU Volunteer” status



The Staff Working Document by the European Commission (2022) introduces the idea of introducing an “EU Volunteer” status⁶. Applying such a legal status for all volunteers active in the European Solidarity Corps, including in-country full-time volunteers active in Solidarity activities, would bring more visibility as well as clarity on the rights and responsibilities of the volunteers across Europe. In the “Study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities” the European Commission calls for minimum standards agreed for volunteers’ benefits and entitlements⁷.

Our proposed “EU Volunteer” status for volunteers active in the European Solidarity Corps programme would:

- **Facilitate visa solutions** for cross-border volunteers: the European Commission (2020) recommends that Member States clarify immigration and other related laws by including volunteering and other solidarity activities as justification per se to obtain a visa and residence permit, and by creating a fast-track visa procedure. *(Implementing experts’ recommendation #6 of the Staff Working Document as well as chapter 2.2 - Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers Across the EU)*
- **Clarify social and legal status:** in order to clarify the entitlements and benefits available to volunteers (e.g. health insurance, taxation and social benefits), Member States should work towards a better-defined and aligned legal status for volunteers, aiming at increased consistency across the EU. *(Implementing experts’ recommendation #9 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Improve information availability and accessibility:** there is a fragmentation or lack of efforts to raise awareness of the value and benefits of cross-border volunteering experience⁸ that can be met by promoting the opportunity of becoming an “EU Volunteer”. *(Implementing experts’ recommendation #5 of the Staff Working Document)*

⁶ Considering the involvement of volunteers from partner countries, the terminology “European Volunteer” could be explored instead.

⁷ See European Commission (2020): study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities https://youth.europa.eu/sites/default/files/obstacles_to_solidarity_executive_summary_en-rev2.pdf

⁸ *ibid.*

- **Better communicate benefits of volunteering, stronger recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering:** there is a lack of unified national frameworks for the recognition of the skills and competences acquired through volunteering, and a lack of recognition for the impact of volunteering. The value that engagement has for society needs to be communicated more actively. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #7 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Making impact more visible:** using the title "EU volunteer" can support efforts in recognising the community impact of volunteering and solidarity activities in both the hosting and sending communities. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #2 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Increase attractiveness of online volunteering:** by using the title "EU volunteer", an additional incentive for digital forms of engagement in connection with the physical mobility of volunteers can be provided. The "EU volunteer" status can help tie this engagement to a precise definition of digital cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #10 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Increase recognition of youth volunteering and make it more coherent:** engagement in volunteering activities is in some cases recognised as work experience, in some cases as a learning experience, and in others it has no recognition at all. An "EU Volunteer" status can help in increasing recognition of the volunteering experience.
- **Open volunteering possibilities for young people from 16 years onwards:** the EU Volunteer status should be open to young people from the age 16 onwards, which should also be reflected in lowering the age limit for suitable volunteering opportunities (e.g. Solidarity projects) from 18 to 16 years of age in the future.

The research paper **"Mapping and Analysis of Research on Youth Volunteering in Europe"** (developed as part of the SNAC Volunteering) concludes: "currently, there is a lack of unified definitions and regulations across European countries, leading to varying interpretations and practices of volunteering. It is crucial to establish a common understanding of volunteering and develop consistent frameworks to ensure its smooth functioning." This conclusion directly backs the ambition of introducing an "EU Volunteer" status.

2. Introduce a “quality charter” for volunteering



The European Solidarity Corps programme guide currently only includes very general directions on how volunteering should be, namely that it should follow the principle of no harm and respect human rights. While the Quality Label ensures organisations fulfil certain standards, an additional reference point for volunteers would be beneficial. The NAs’ Quality Label Working Group⁹ has identified the need for minimum quality standards for volunteering activities in addition to the Quality Label, similar to the quality charter that used to be part of the previous Erasmus+ programme. The European Commission’s Staff Working Document takes the same direction, proposing a quality charter for transnational volunteering and solidarity activities. The European Solidarity Corps charter could provide a blueprint for high quality standards in the field of transnational volunteering.

It should be a requirement that each volunteering promoter receiving European funding adheres to the provisions set out in the charter. When developing the charter, it is important to keep in mind that those standards should not compromise the accessibility to programme newcomers. Experienced, specialised organisations will have a natural advantage in complying with the charter, therefore measures to support new organisations should be considered from the onset.

A quality charter will include minimum standards and guidelines to:

- **Focus on solidarity:** a quality charter can be a formal reference point for quality standards for volunteering, including solidarity as a core principle for volunteering.
- **Ensure health, safety and security of participants:** a quality charter can help supporting organisers involved in the implementation of volunteering activities in ensuring that clear and reliable procedures are in place to care for and assist volunteers in the event of crises, emergencies and other unforeseen circumstances. (*Implementing Council Recommendation #1*)
- **Include support measures for mental health:** even before the COVID-19 pandemic put young people’s mental health in the spotlight, a significant and increasing number of young people across Europe have been expressing their concern on the prevalence of mental health issues¹⁰. A new quality charter needs to lay out provisions for ensuring basic standards for supporting mental health.

⁹ Quality Label Working Group, <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity/training-support-community/qlwg/>

¹⁰ As part of the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027, the European Youth Goals include a goal on Mental Health & Wellbeing (#5)

- **Ensure inclusivity:** a quality charter can help ensuring that organisers of volunteering activities are encouraged to promote social inclusion, among others, by providing reasonable and suitable accommodation that is accessible to young people, in particular those with disabilities. *(Implementing Council Recommendation #4 and experts' recommendation #5 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Include digital forms:** a quality charter should outline standards for new and digital forms of cross-border volunteering and solidarity if those forms are included in future European volunteering programmes. That will help develop a shared understanding of digital cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities and its recognition. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #10 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Include environmental aspects:** considering climate impacts when implementing cross-border activities, since concern for the environment has grown dramatically, especially among young people. Protecting the environment and combating climate change can constitute a form of solidarity. A quality charter should ensure that the environmental impact of all actions in a volunteering project are being considered, participants should be supported in developing an awareness of environmental issues and making environmentally friendly choices. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #11 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Recognition of skills:** a quality charter can help set the ground for a more universal recognition and validation of learning outcomes acquired during volunteering, e.g. by requiring that the relevant information and support is given to the volunteers, and by making systematic use of the established European recognition tools – like Youthpass – in the context of Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #13 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Distinguish between paid staff and volunteers:** a quality charter can outline actions and strategies to ensure that the involvement of volunteers complements and supplements the work of paid staff (see also: Framework for volunteerism and compensation of young people).

While the Quality Label, as an essential part of the European Solidarity Corps programme, includes some practical guidelines on ensuring the programme quality, a more holistic quality charter for volunteering, in general, provided by the European institutions is currently lacking.

The quality charter should consider different pieces of work on the subject of quality in volunteering, especially:

- the European Solidarity Corps Charter (https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/charter_en);
- the “European Quality Standards in Youth Volunteering” developed by the Centre for European Volunteering and partners in the #eQyvol project (<https://www.eqyvol.eu/>);
- the EUROPEAN CHARTER ON THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF VOLUNTEERS developed in 2012 by the European Youth Forum (https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/volunteering_charter_en.pdf);
- the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 #BEV2030;
- the 2014 Council Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships;
- the “Mapping and Analysis of Research on Youth Volunteering in Europe” (developed as part of the SNAC Volunteering)¹¹;
- the work of the NAs’ Quality Label Working Group.

¹¹ See the research paper: <https://bit.ly/youth-engagement-snac-research>

3. Foster capacity building



The current “Capacity Building in the field of youth” (KA2) as part of the Erasmus+ programme is not systematically used for volunteering and solidarity, even though some successful examples can be identified¹². In addition to Networking Activities (NET) available for NAs, it is also important to provide organisations with a tool to shape formats and experiment according to their needs¹³. Ensuring that instruments including Erasmus+ KA2 and NET are available, being promoted and being used for capacity building in the field of solidarity and volunteering would help to:

- **Focus on solidarity:** increase cooperation and activities of organisations directly linked to the European Union’s core value of solidarity.
- **Foster networking and knowledge sharing:** capacity building resources can open new spaces for innovation and peer learning activities to further develop new forms and methods of volunteering. They can help to intensify networking through alumni communities and the exchange of youth workers and voluntary organisation practitioners. They can be used to make available enhanced training and qualification opportunities. *(Implementing experts’ recommendation #4 of the Staff Working Document and Council Recommendation #6)*
- **Explore complementarity between different volunteering schemes:** organisations can play an active role in creating synergies, complementarities and continuities between volunteering schemes and activities existing at European level and at various levels in Member States, when provided with resources to do so. Capacity building resources can enable them to exchange good practice and identify success factors. *(Implementing Council Recommendation #8 as well as experts’ recommendation #3 of the Staff Working Document)*
- **Explore community involvement and impact:** in order to strengthen links between hosting and sending communities, organisations need additional resources that they can dedicate to increasing impact beyond the volunteering tenure. *(Implementing experts’ recommendation #2 of the Staff Working Document)*¹⁴

¹² See the research paper: <https://bit.ly/complementarities-synergies-SNAC-research>

¹³ In a consultation that informed the *Staff Working Document* (European Commission 2022), NGOs pointed out “the low number of measures for capacity building and support and the low number of organizations having the capacity to take part in the ESC.” (page 28)

¹⁴ The research paper (see above) lists an example of a project (called “Safe&Informed Volunteering”) that supports the integration of volunteers in the project community, thus increasing community involvement and impact.

- **Increase thematic work on/with programme priorities:** not all the organisations providing volunteering opportunities are experienced in and well equipped for supporting volunteering activities that make a meaningful contribution to, for example, tackling climate and environment-related challenges. Capacity building resources can be used to enable them to improve their knowledge to do so as well as get prepared for other programme priorities like inclusion and diversity, participation and digital transformation. *(Implementing Council Recommendation #9)¹⁵*
- **Explore online volunteering:** digital forms of cross-border volunteering and solidarity received a boost during the COVID-19 crisis, where physical mobility was not easily possible. Many organisations could benefit from additional resources to build on those experiences and find ways to complement and integrate digital volunteering with physical mobility. *(Implementing experts' recommendation #10 of the Staff Working Document)*

Capacity building resources within the European Solidarity Corps (or successor programme) have the potential of systematically strengthening the cooperation in the civic engagement sector in a similar way in which the youth sector was strengthened and developed¹⁶ during the past two decades through the Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes. The European Solidarity Corps opens possibilities to different beneficiary organisations compared to Erasmus+ youth and includes the civil society sector, social entrepreneurs, environmental organisations, municipalities and the whole volunteering field.

While the current Erasmus+ Key Action 2 can cover some aspects of capacity building in the field of volunteering and solidarity, organisations implementing the European Solidarity Corps are often unaware of that possibility¹⁷ and not all aspects of the programme are necessarily covered (e.g. Solidarity Projects or volunteering outside of the youth sector, e.g. in elderly homes, cultural associations, environmental organisations).

¹⁵ The research paper (see above) lists an example of a project (called "IMProVE 2:0 - Inclusive Methods in Professional Volunteering in Europe") in which different tools and methods of supporting volunteers with disabilities are being developed. This serves as an example, how the programme priority "inclusion" is supported through a capacity building activity under Erasmus+.

¹⁶ See for example: Chapter "Organisational Effects and Recommendations" (page 36f.) in the RAY-CAP Research Report: Competence development and capacity building of youth workers and youth leaders. https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/RAY-CAP_Final-Research-Report_20191108.pdf

¹⁷ *ibid.*

The following National Agencies and SALTOs stand behind and support this position paper



Editorial info

Editor and Publisher: OeAD-GmbH | Ebendorferstraße 7 | 1010 Vienna | Headquarters: Vienna FN 320219k | Commercial Court Vienna | ATU 64808925 | **Author:** Georg Feiner | **Coordination:** Jana Randa – SALTO European Solidarity Corps | T + 43 153408-0, rc-solidarity@oead.at | **Illustrations:** Agne Rapalaite Rasiule | **Layout design:** Eleonora Schulze-Battmann | Vienna, September 2023

Creative commons licence



This work is published under licence: Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This publication was created with the support of the European Solidarity Corps programme of the European Commission. The European Commission's support in producing this publication does not constitute an endorsement of its contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.