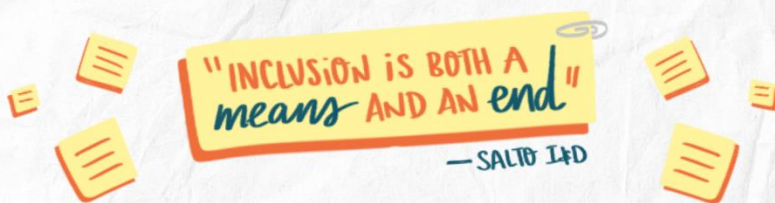




Executive summary
of the Research Report

Making Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps **MORE INCLUSIVE**

Inclusiveness of the programmes
and contribution of the Inclusion and
Diversity Strategy in enhancing
inclusion in the youth field.



January 2024
Gisele Evrard for SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre



EUROPEAN UNION



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SOLIDARITY
CORPS

THE POWER OF TOGETHER.

Erasmus+

Enriching lives, opening minds.



Making Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps **MORE INCLUSIVE**

Inclusiveness of the programmes and contribution of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in enhancing inclusion in the youth field.

Inclusion and Diversity data (period 2021-2023)

PROJECTS ADDRESSING **INCLUSION**

3885 [24.05%]

Erasmus+ Youth

3528 [56.49%]

European Solidarity Corps

These activities represent **22%-25%** of all programmes' participants, with **more than 40%** of them being young people with fewer opportunities.

"INCLUSION IS BOTH A MEANS AND AN END"

— SALTO I&D



Main insights and findings

Perspectives, experiences, insights, and feedback concerning the inclusiveness of the Erasmus+ and ESC programmes since 2021.

NATIONAL AGENCIES

National I&D strategies

– positive development

Budget allocation difficulties

Need to reach out to **new organisations & target groups**

Simplification of **application procedures**

Support dimensions require **effort and time**

QUANTITY OVER QUALITY?

TRAINERS, EXPERTS, AND BENEFICIARY ORGANISATIONS

Nuanced perspectives influence how organisations apply I&D in the programmes

Bureaucratic complexities – inclusive intentions vs. practical implementation

Project formats do not align with the programme's objectives

SALTO RCs

Unequal budget allocation between Erasmus+ and the ESC

TEC training: mental health support and diversity in trainers' teams

Relationship between **policy, strategy, and implementation**

TOOLS, EXPERTISE, RESOURCES, & TRAINING EVENTS



NEWCOMERS

Valued opportunities for personal development and intercultural engagement

Inclusion and **accessibility measures** for participants with disabilities

Complex procedures can lead to discouragement. More **accessible and simplified information is needed**

Conclusions and suggestions



Since 2021, **Erasmus+ Youth and the ESC have significantly enhanced I&D** within the youth sector, but **improvements are still needed:**

MAIN AND GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Changes in the approach and evaluation of the programmes
2. Understanding and addressing barriers to inclusion
3. Structural change over individual 'integration'
4. New monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
5. A more sensitive approach to labels
6. Revision of inclusion budgets



programmes' design
budget allocation
application processes
outreach mechanisms
evaluation measures

GREATER DIVERSITY and EASIER ACCESS FOR A BROADER RANGE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

NEIGHBOURING PARTNER COUNTRIES

Need for enhanced cooperation with neighbouring countries and regions, promoting values such as solidarity, democracy, and human rights.

Increased funding for E+ Youth and ESC will lead to stronger intercultural exchanges and collaborative projects benefiting vulnerable communities.

A possibly stigmatising title

Restrictive age limits

Complex and time consuming procedures

Visual notes based on the research report "Making Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps more inclusive" (January, 2024)

SALTO

INCLUSION & DIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

This executive summary is an overview of the research report 'Making Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps more inclusive'. It presents a summary of the main findings, insights, suggestions, and strategic recommendations. It is designed to provide policymakers, SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre (SALTO I&D), the network of National Agencies (NAs, primarily inclusion officers), and stakeholders involved in inclusion and diversity with the report's most important parts enabling informed decisions and actions based on its insights.

Purpose and scope of the research report

The research report aims to contribute to the interim evaluation of the [Erasmus+](#) and [European Solidarity Corps](#) programmes (2021-2027). The report primarily examines the extent of the inclusiveness of the programmes, and the contribution of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in enhancing inclusion in the youth field, through the European youth programmes. The research report offers an overview of the progress made and identifies both strengths and areas for improvement.

Inclusion and Diversity: concepts and definitions

The report underlines the **importance of clear definitions and concepts**, which the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy builds on, such as diversity, inclusion, exclusion, marginalisation, personal and social identities, social cohesion, and young people with fewer opportunities (YPWFOs). However, the research report also points out **diverse interpretations of these concepts**. For instance, while many opinions agree on the difference between inclusion and integration, their understandings vary when it comes to inclusion *per se* and related concepts. Half view inclusion as a means to achieve inclusive societies with more social justice, while the other half see it as a structure-oriented approach to equal participation. Integration is often seen as the assimilation of minorities into existing norms. Additionally, an inclusive society is seen as one where structures are inclusive, challenging the notion of 'inclusion groups' and focusing on universal participation.

METHODOLOGY

The research is a qualitative exploration of the developments in inclusion and diversity within the European youth programmes since 2021, focusing on experiences and insights rather than quantitative data. Although it includes overviews and preliminary data from the European Commission, the report mainly relies on findings from open-ended questionnaires, meetings, reports, interviews, focus groups, and literature reviews.

The research process, led by SALTO I&D, is based on the following document and work material:

- Desk Research (07-10/23).
- Focus groups and interviews¹ (09-11/23).
- Written contributions from other SALTO RCs.
- Outcomes of events and meetings.
- Data material from the European Commission.²

The research report underlines that at the time of its writing, the national mid-term reports and the final analysis of RAY data are incomplete. Therefore, an updated version of this report might be issued in the second half of 2024.

¹ With staff (26) from NAs (18), SALTO I&D and European Solidarity Corps staff (5), trainers, experts, beneficiary organisations' representatives (12), and newcomers (3).

² The Harvesting Conference (09/23), the I&D Steering Group (10/23), the ID Kitchen (10/23), and the Discover EU Inclusion Round Table (11/23).

INCLUSION & DIVERSITY IN THE PROGRAMMES

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps focus on four horizontal priorities across their various actions: **inclusion and diversity**, digital transformation, environment and fight against climate change, and participation in democratic life, common values, and civic engagement. Both programmes aim to *promote equal opportunities, access, inclusion, diversity, and fairness*.

To support implementing the principles lying behind the inclusion and diversity priority, the European Commission published a [Framework of Inclusion Measures](#) that complements the [Inclusion and Diversity Strategy](#) and seeks to facilitate access to the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes for young people with fewer opportunities, by removing obstacles and providing implementation guidance. The barriers identified in the Framework include disabilities, health issues, educational and training system barriers, cultural differences, social and economic barriers, discrimination, and geographical challenges.

Inclusion and Diversity data

The analysis of Erasmus+ (2014-2020), the European Solidarity Corps (2018-2020) and the current programmes generation (2021-2027) shows that **Erasmus+ Youth** and the **European Solidarity Corps represent between 27% and 34% of all approved projects** in both programmes. Moreover, these activities represent **between 22% and 25% of all programmes' participants**, with **more than 40% of them being YPWFOs**³. This is to be seen considering that Erasmus+ (Youth) and the European Solidarity Corps receive 13,83 % of the total budget combined.

The period 2021-2023 shows 6.245 projects under the European Solidarity Corps and 16.151 under Erasmus+ Youth. From these projects, those **addressing I&D** are:

- European Solidarity Corps: 3.528 **(56,49%)**
- Erasmus+ Youth: 3.885 **(24,05%)**
- Total: 7.413⁴ **(33,1%)**

The research report also provides a series of charts, providing a clear overview of data about inclusion per county, programme and action, and topic⁵.

³ Source: EC Dashboards, Annexes 1 and 1a, extracted in autumn 2023.

⁴ Source: European Commission

⁵ Source: Ibid

MAIN INSIGHTS & FINDINGS: NATIONAL AGENCIES & STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVES

Overview of focus groups, interviews, and additional contributions

The research report includes the contributions of a series of focus groups and interviews, conducted between September and November 2023. The primary aim of these sessions was to gather diverse perspectives, experiences, insights, and feedback concerning the inclusiveness of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes since 2021.

National Agencies

Key areas that emerged

Most NAs either have a national I&D strategy or are developing it, which is seen as a positive development and extra guidance and support. NAs underline several improvements that have been made at the level of the programmes, such as increased support for organisations, the introduction of the lump sum system, and the establishment of Quality Labels and accreditations.

However, NAs face **budget constraints**, often leading smaller NAs to have to choose between more general projects and those with a stronger inclusion focus. Challenges also include **reaching new organisations and target groups**, adapting to **new applicant profiles** (like social workers), and the **need to simplify application procedures**. There is also a perception that the European Commission prioritises quantity over quality, which calls for a need for consistency between programmes' priorities and implementation.

Exchanges with NAs underline the importance of better budget allocation, simplified procedures, and the need for a stronger focus on qualitative assessments. The current lump sums and maximum grants disadvantage projects with high(er) inclusion costs. A more **comprehensive overview of activities** (including TCA and NET activities) **and participants** is needed, along with more tailored information approaches and promotional materials. Additionally, NAs are encouraged to provide **barrier-free information sessions**, diverse promotional materials, and more accessible reporting formats.

Erasmus+ related

- **Balancing broader youth participation and inclusion projects** is challenging and requires sometimes making choices between general and inclusion projects.
- **Engagement and outreach efforts** are hindered by complex application processes (forms and procedures), misunderstandings of information, and the difficulty for new organisations to define their inclusion strategic plans.

- **Simplification of application procedures and forms** is needed not only for a better reach out but for more inclusive and quality projects. Funding mechanisms such as the EYY's micro-grants, are needed for youth-led projects or those organised by small organisations. This is particularly true for Youth Participation, Mobility of Young People and Small-Scale Partnerships.

European Solidarity Corps-related

- Despite budget challenges, the programme **is seen as accessible and supportive** of youth participation with a focus on inclusion.
- **Budget-related challenges** include the need for support beyond mentorships and a higher coordination fee for lead organisations.
- Simplified and **more inclusive volunteering project formats** are necessary to better serve YPWFOs.
- Concerns about the **diversity of applicant profiles** and the importance of quality assessment and therefore, of the Quality Label.

SALTO Resource Centres

Key areas that emerged

Since 2021, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps faced various challenges and changing contexts, significantly impacting the Resource Centres (RCs) like SALTO Inclusion and Diversity and the European Solidarity Resource Centre⁶, which operate with still limited budgets. These challenges primarily refer to the need to enhance inclusion and diversity within the programmes.

Like NAs, the key issues include **budget constraints, difficulties in reaching specific target groups and organisations**, especially in the European Solidarity Corps, and complex regulations and procedures for beneficiary organisations. External factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, socio-economic factors, conflicts, and wars have also influenced inclusion practices, requiring constant adaptation.

There's a noted **inequality in budget allocations between Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps**, with the latter facing budget cuts, making it challenging for NAs to prioritise funding for inclusive projects. The **quality of TEC training** was also mentioned, with NAs acknowledging the need to continuously train and update the competences of TEC trainers, particularly in mental health support and ensuring diversity among the trainers' teams.

⁶ Those are the two RCs interviewed

Exchanges also tackled the **influential role of the European Commission and the complex relationship between policy, strategy, and practical implementation** in shaping the future direction of the programmes.

Erasmus+ related

- **Inclusion and diversity initiatives:** the exchanges underline the need to focus on the development and implementation of the new strategy, highlighting the need for strategic and effective implementation.
- **Budget allocation:** the increase in the Erasmus+ budget due to COVID-19 measures was appreciated, but differences in resource distribution were noted, calling for their revision for more consistency and for addressing the reality of the work of 'inclusion organisations'.
- **Mental health:** growing mental health issues among young people are underlined as a significant challenge that needs much more attention in the future.
- **Feedback:** the European Commission's adjustments made and the openness to feedback were viewed positively.

European Solidarity Corps-related

- **Programme overview:** the programme's transformation into a solid volunteer engagement one was seen as very positive.
- **Inclusion efforts and community building** and the impact on inclusion are acknowledged, but more data is needed to support this perception.
- **Budgetary constraints and impact:** the budget cuts are challenging, especially concerning the balance between more placements for more and more inclusive projects.

Trainers, experts, and beneficiary organisations

Key areas that emerged

The interviews and focus groups tackled the **nature of diversity and inclusion within the programmes**, emphasising the distinction between the values of diversity and the active role and function of inclusion in addressing exclusion and barriers. This nuanced perspective impacts how organisations apply these concepts in the programmes. Exchanges also addressed the **characteristics of the programmes**, with Erasmus+ primarily focusing on 'more traditional youth mobility', while the European Solidarity Corps provides more local and accessible opportunities, particularly benefiting YPWFOs.

Projects within both programmes face **bureaucratic complexities, visa issues, budget limitations, and the need for bigger support to smaller organisations**. These challenges highlight the inconsistency between inclusive intentions and practical implementation. Moreover, **external pressures and societal contexts significantly influence the effectiveness** of the programmes in promoting inclusion and diversity and inclusion, which can sometimes hinder their possibility of achieving their objectives. The exchanges underlined this point, especially about the European Solidarity Corps aims at (also) promoting inclusion, it does not consistently align its project formats with this objective, and not all participants in 'inclusion projects' come from vulnerable backgrounds, revealing a difference between theory and practice.

Erasmus+ related

- **Participants' demographics:** the programme seems to attract, even for youth projects, diverse profiles, including university students and 'young adults' that do also face challenging situations or come from sensitive environments.
- **Implementation challenges:** like the other groups, challenges such as bureaucratic processes, language barriers, and financial constraints are underlined as significant obstacles.
- **Accreditations and lump sums:** appreciation for the new accreditation process and the introduction of lump sums was expressed, with concerns about excessive demands for justification and data collection by some NAs.

European Solidarity Corps-related

- **Local engagement and accessibility:** the exchanges underlined that the fact to focus on local initiatives makes participation more accessible to a broader range of young people, including YPWFOs.
- **Implementation challenges:** like Erasmus+, those challenges refer to complex bureaucracy and financial limitations that hinder efforts to support disadvantaged participants.
- **Lack of specific inclusion strategies:** it seems that many organisations struggle with defining or implementing concrete strategies for including YPWFOs.

- **Quality Labels:** although their introduction is highly appreciated, it also raises the need for better-defined strategies for inclusion among organisations applying for the Quality Label.

Newcomers

Key areas that emerged (general for both programmes)

Newcomers to the programmes highly value the opportunities they provide for personal development and intercultural engagement. They underline the initial motivation to travel, have new experiences, and gain a deeper understanding of volunteering, inclusion, and cultural diversity.

One of the **challenges voiced is about ensuring inclusion and accessibility for participants with disabilities**. Moreover, **newcomers may not be aware of the existing measures in place** and may feel unsure about the complexity of the procedures and about how to navigate the logistical aspects. This can lead to feelings overwhelmed and generate concerns about ‘fitting’ into the programmes and **can easily turn the motivation into overwhelming feelings and discouragement**.

Newcomers underlined that the **process of identifying suitable projects complex** and once again, overwhelming. There is a clear **need for more accessible and simplified information** to assist newcomers in selecting the right projects. To provide better support, they highlight the **potential role of peer support, networking opportunities, and returnees** in guiding newcomers through this process.

The question of the **importance of promotional materials** that reflect better diversity and activities that consider various needs in their design was also mentioned.

Newcomers also expressed some concerns about the **upfront costs associated with travel** to activities when NAs cannot pre-pay the train or flights. This underlines the **necessity for more helpful and comprehensive financial support mechanisms**, and to ensure that financial barriers are addressed to maintain the accessibility of these programmes and make them more equitable for all participants.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

General observations: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance

Since 2021, Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps have **significantly enhanced inclusion and diversity within the youth sector**. Both programmes saw an increase in inclusion projects, with Erasmus+ showing a substantial one. Actions have been taken to enhance accessibility, including the creation of new actions and project formats for YPWFOs, as well as budget adjustments for inclusion support.

However, **improvements are still needed**. Enhancing the programmes' design, adjusting budget allocation, application processes, outreach mechanisms, and evaluation measures would improve the programmes' efficiency and effectiveness. The **current procedures and formats are overwhelming** for newcomers and smaller organisations. Budgets also need alignment with inflation and the actual costs of inclusion projects.

NAs and SALTO RCs, particularly SALTO Inclusion and Diversity and the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre, have **played a very important role in enhancing inclusion and diversity**, and their work is highly appreciated. crucial roles. National I&D strategies have contributed to supporting more inclusion projects and attracted new organisations, with different profiles. However, **financial, and human resource limitations can hinder these efforts**. Indeed, while the quality of inclusion projects has improved, more work is required to support the development of organisations' inclusion strategies. Training and learning offers need improvement to be more adaptable to diverse situations.

Despite the challenges, the ongoing programmes' evolution is positive, emphasising their unique contributions to fostering inclusion and diversity in European youth work. Future developments should reinforce their distinct potential and impact.

Main and general recommendations

- **Approach and evaluation of the programmes:** there is a need to change how the programmes are approached, with a greater emphasis on developing and supporting inclusive initiatives and projects, rather than solely focusing on the number of YPWFOs involved. This shift should include facilitating the implementation of more tailored mechanisms, from the first access to information to the implementation of inclusion projects.
- **Evaluation and monitoring:** while the programmes progressed in addressing inclusion and diversity and in reaching more marginalised groups, additional evaluation and analysis of their effectiveness and efficiency are required. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should go beyond the current tools employed by the European Commission, with the development of new tools for NAs and SALTO RCs.

- **Structural change vs. individual 'integration':** there is a tension between addressing individual needs and fostering structural changes. The emphasis should be on developing inclusive, diversity-sensitive structures that remove barriers from the beginning, rather than solely concentrating on 'individual integration' or participation.
- **Understanding and addressing barriers to inclusion:** It is important to recognise and effectively tackle the barriers to inclusion and diversity, to increase the accessibility to the programmes. Although there is now a better understanding of these barriers, more effective support mechanisms, requiring significant efforts and resources, are needed.
- **A more sensitive approach to labels:** a deeper understanding is required regarding organisations' reluctance to use 'inclusion labels' or label participants as 'YPWFOs' for ethical and moral concerns. Moreover, some NAs. Because of national regulations, dive into the personal details of potential 'YPWFO' participants to justify extra funding, a practice that should be minimized or reduced.
- **Inclusion budgets:** managing the substantial costs of inclusion projects is a challenge. NAs face pressure to secure additional budgets for these projects without reducing the overall number of funded projects. This issue should be addressed at the source, involving a revision of the budgets allocated to NAs and adjustments to the limited lump sums and maximum grants for organisations, to better align with the high costs of inclusion projects, including the necessary human resources for their management.

Additional recommendations for Erasmus+ Youth

- **Youth Exchanges, Youth Participation, and Small-scale Partnerships:** there is a need to increase lump sums and additional financial support for inclusion projects, along with better support for the human resources of organisations managing these projects. The success of the European Year of Youth (EYY) micro-grants model, which simplified procedures and increased project numbers for small organisations, could serve as a positive example. It is also important to investigate the reasons why some YPWFOs do not participate in these actions.
- **Accreditations:** accreditations have significantly eased the work of organisations and improved project quality. However, as this is a relatively new process, ongoing monitoring is essential to ensure it does not prevent organisations from participating in the programmes.

Additional recommendations for the European Solidarity Corps

- **Profiles of applicants:** there is a need to address the diversity of applicants, partially through a bigger focus on the significant role of the Quality Label and the necessity to put more emphasis on the assessment of applications.

- **Budget:** while the programme is seen as accessible and effective in promoting participation among YPWFOs, the overall budget is considered insufficient for fully achieving the programme's priority of I&D. A general budget increase, with a priority on allocation for inclusion-focused projects, is recommended, along with effective monitoring of the use of grants to ensure more impactful project results.
- **Lump sums:** the lump sums need to go beyond just covering reinforced mentorships. Moreover, the flat rate for coordination fees should consider the number of volunteers involved in the projects.

The 'Discover EU Inclusion Challenge'

The research process shed light on the implementation of the Discover EU Inclusion Action (DEUI), which can be summarised in three primary challenges:

- **Age limit restrictions:** the age limit for participation, particularly for young people under 18 or those turning 18 at the start of a project, is too restrictive and does not align with the needs of the inclusion target groups, especially YPWFOs.
- **Complex procedures:** the DEUI process is seen as complex and time-consuming, generating an additional burden on NAs and organisations. Among the issues mentioned, we find complications in the design, application, and implementation processes, as well as practical and technical challenges like the Rail pass difficulties when booking group tickets and managing last-minute changes.
- **A possibly stigmatising title:** the title "Discover EU Inclusion Action" is perceived as stigmatizing and inconsistent with KA1 project types. Suggestions to reconsider the name, format, and procedures of the action, were expressed. The title, with its focus on inclusion groups, is also seen as potentially limiting the diversity within groups and reducing the opportunities for mutual learning.

Despite these challenges, NAs and organizations support the concept of the DEUI but advocate for greater diversity and easier access for a broader and older range of young people.

A focus on neighbouring partner countries

Youth work (and the world) faces global challenges like wars, conflicts, and environmental crises and programmes like Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps need to address them, for those challenges impact young people and more fragile communities. The exchanges in the context of the research report and the desk research emphasise the need for enhanced cooperation with neighbouring countries and regions, promoting values such as solidarity, democracy, and human rights. This cooperation is also essential for broadening cultural exchange and nurturing mutual understanding and respect.

The importance of these programmes goes beyond borders, requiring a transnational approach to tackle these challenges effectively. The regional Resource Centres have recently put more focus on inclusion and diversity, but achieving these objectives requires increased funding for Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps, for it will improve the efficiency of the programmes, leading to stronger intercultural exchanges and collaborative projects, particularly benefiting vulnerable communities.

In the current global context, strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries is a strategic investment in the future of European youth. It is a crucial step toward building a more inclusive, diverse, resilient, and united Europe. Therefore, increasing the budget and expanding project formats and opportunities for such cooperation is essential.

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