

Peer Learning Activity

Background Paper

Exploring complementarity and synergy between the European Solidarity Corps and national/regional volunteering schemes.

The context

The landscape for volunteering and solidarity activities in Europe is highly diverse. Some Member States have a long and rich tradition of voluntary service with established schemes supporting volunteering both at home and abroad; in others the concept is less developed, and the major (in some cases only) sources of funding – especially for cross-border activities – are the European programmes and initiatives, notably the European Solidarity Corps (ESC)¹. In addition to the diversity experienced at horizontal level across Europe (and indeed the rest of the world), the field is also very complex when viewed in a vertical perspective. Several attempts have been made to construct a typology (or taxonomy) for volunteering and solidarity activities, focusing either on the purpose of the activities (purposive typology) or the nature of these and the organisations involved (analytical/theoretical typology), but existing versions remain impractically long, imprecise and with unclear and flexible boundaries². Moreover, the field is constantly evolving, with other formats of volunteering and solidarity (e.g., intergenerational volunteering³, digital volunteering, service learning, and “voluntourism”⁴) gaining ground.

The importance of volunteering and other solidarity activities is recognised at political level both in a European and a Member State context – at macro-level as a tool for European cohesiveness, at meso-level as having a positive impact on communities, and at micro-level as an important arena for informal and non-formal learning of individuals, especially for young people with fewer opportunities. At the grassroots-level, volunteering is increasingly popular among young people. The most recent Eurobarometer report (2018) where young people’s attitudes and engagement in volunteering is probed, shows a growing interest for volunteering: about 31% of young people have been involved in organised volunteering activities in the last 12 months, a 6% increase since 2014. The survey also reveals that most volunteering activities (69%) are aimed at changing something in the local community, but participation in cross-border volunteering has increased with 8% of young respondents having volunteered abroad (a 2% increase since 2014)⁵.

¹ See e.g., PPMI study: Study on Removing Obstacles to Cross-Border Solidarity Activities, European Commission, 2020, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1a7042cb-e678-11ea-ad25-01aa75ed71a1>, pp. 16-24.

² See e.g., Smith, Stebbins, Grotz, Kumar, Nga and van Puyvelde: “Typologies of associations and volunteering”, in the *Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation and Non-profit Associations* (ed. Smith, Stebbins and Grotz), Palgrave Handbooks, 2016 Vol. 1 pp. 90-125.

³ For a description, see e.g.: Volunteering and Intergenerational Solidarity. Special Eurobarometer Report, October 2011, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2011/juillet/04_07/rapport_%20eb75_2_%20benevolat_en.pdf

⁴ Volunteering stays abroad offered by commercial operators against a fee.

⁵ Flash Eurobarometer 455 on European Youth (2018), <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2163>.

The Peer Learning Activity

This Peer Learning Activity (PLA) is predicated upon the intention of Estonia to set up a national scheme of youth volunteering. It will bring together experts and stakeholders from up to 14 Member States to explore the different models and features of various national volunteering and/or civic schemes, seeking to identify synergies and approaches to ensuring the complementarity and consistency with the ESC. By “scheme” we mean public programmes or initiatives that support young people’s volunteering activities. This definition also covers schemes where youth is only part of the target group, and they may be targeted either at national or cross-border activities, or both.

This Background Paper will feed into this process, discussing the concepts of “synergy” and “complementarity” in the relationship between the European programmes and initiatives in the field of solidarity (notably the ESC) and schemes at national/regional level. It will also identify key areas for attention in this process, drawing on experiences from selected Member States, and describe concrete initiatives taken to overcome challenges encountered through practice examples from across Europe. The purpose is to provide a common ground for the discussions in the PLA-event.

The state of play

In November 2018, the Council adopted the European Union Youth Strategy, which sets out a framework for European cooperation in the youth field for 2019-27, based on the European Commission’s Communication of May 2018 on Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people⁶. The Strategy puts solidarity activities at the heart of youth policy cooperation, and under the core area “Connect”, it invites the Commission and the Member States within their respective field of competence to (among other things): “Encourage young people’s engagement in solidarity, promoting support schemes and *seek complementarity and synergies between EU funding instruments and national, regional and local schemes*”⁷. The theme consequently also figures prominently in the proposal for a new Recommendation to replace the 2008 Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across Europe.

The situation on the ground does not seem to reflect these ambitions, however. A 2019 study on obstacles to solidarity mapped national/regional level schemes and found that 19 out of the then 28 European countries had one or more national/regional level schemes supporting cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities among young people⁸. Complementarity and synergy would require that there is coordination and exchange of information between schemes, yet the study “*has not identified a single EU Member State that possesses a dedicated strategy on youth volunteering*”. We have no overview of any developments after 2019, but from anecdotal evidence the situation does not seem to have changed significantly.

A big part of the problem lies in the diverse nature of volunteering, which means that funding schemes may be anchored in different organisational frameworks and authorities, like e.g., ministries for youth, social affairs, education (or even in some cases foreign affairs). This makes coordination and knowledge-sharing between schemes challenging. Even though volunteering and solidarity is spread across a wide expanse of

⁶ European Commission, Communication on Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy, 22 May 2018, SWD(2018) 68 final, https://europa.eu/youth/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/youth_com_269_1_en_act_part1_v9.pdf.

⁷ See https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy/connect_en. *Italics* inserted for this paper

⁸ PPMI study: Study on Removing Obstacles to Cross-Border Solidarity Activities, European Commission, 2020, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1a7042cb-e678-11ea-ad25-01aa75ed71a1>.

society, there are nevertheless common features that are best tackled through a concerted effort. This may e.g., concern the legal status of volunteers, capacity building of organisations, administrative obstacles, international dimensions of volunteering, recognition of learning outcomes, etc. as well as general lobbying efforts vis-à-vis the political system. However, due to the compartmentalisation that characterises the field in many countries, initiatives introduced to pool resources and maximise influence are often of a sectorial nature.

In Denmark, two state funded organisations serve to coordinate the volunteering effort in the field of social welfare. The National Council of Volunteering (*Frivilligrådet*⁹) represents stakeholder organisations and offers advice and counsel to the Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs on matters of volunteering. Eight out of twelve members of the Council have been elected amongst organisations active in volunteering. The Danish Institute for Voluntary Effort (*Center for Frivilligt Arbejde*¹⁰) is an independent organisation set up to strengthen volunteering, active citizenship and civil society in Denmark through development and knowledge sharing in the social welfare sector. Due to the focus on social welfare in Denmark, other areas of volunteering (e.g., outgoing cross-border mobility of volunteers) are only marginally – or not at all – an item on the agenda of these two organisations.

Even in Member States where volunteering schemes are coordinated by one ministry, there is no guarantee that this will entail any structured coordination and knowledge-sharing between these.

In Germany, there are several large, national schemes that promote cross-border volunteering, one of which is the International Youth Voluntary Service (*Internationaler Jugendfreiwilligendienst/IFJD*), which has many similarities with the ESC. Even though the two are under the aegis of the same ministry (the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth), a case study of the IFJD concludes that “There is no official connection between the Corps and IJFD. The synergies between the schemes are not evident since the situation in Germany is quite unique. There are a lot of volunteering schemes available for young people and they compete with each other. Large organisations providing voluntary services in Germany use different programmes, both the European Solidarity Corps and the IJFD as well as other programmes, and they often do not highlight the profile of the particular programme. As a result, it is not always clear to participants under which programme they are funded¹¹.”

The nature of complementarity and synergy

In the Expert Group created in 2019 for the review of the 2008 Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across Europe¹², the relationship between European and national/regional schemes was discussed at some length, and the group pointed out that the interplay need not necessarily be a positive one. In the event of overlaps in activity areas, there is potentially the danger of a “cuckoo’s nest” syndrome developing, where the introduction of new schemes does not expand the field, but merely ousts already existing ones, with the result that no real development takes place. The arrival of European funding may, for instance, be a tempting argument for cuts in national budgets, in which case no progress is made. This is a field where we do not have much evidence, let alone a conceptual framework to guide discussions, but a 2012 European “Study on Mobility Developments in School Education, Vocational Education and Training,

⁹ <https://www.frivilligraadet.dk/omfrivilligrdet> (website with English version)

¹⁰ <https://frivillighed.dk/om-center-for-frivilligt-socialt-arbejde> (website with English version)

¹¹ PPMI: Study on Removing Obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities, Annex 3 (Good practice Case Studies), p. 7. European Commission, 2020, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1a7042cb-e678-11ea-ad25-01aa75ed71a1>.

¹² Consisting of experts and stakeholders appointed by Member States and the European Commission. Facilitated by ECORYS.

Adult Education and Youth Exchange”¹³ identifies, on the basis of an analysis of transnational mobility programmes in education and training, four models of interplay between mobility schemes (which in this case would also comprise cross-border volunteering): two positive and two negative:

Complementarity: when synergies are exploited and developed to cover a wider variety of activities or target groups, extend geographical coverage and/or increase the quality of mobility inside the framework of existing schemes.

Instigation: when actors and stakeholders cooperate proactively to create a heightened awareness of mobility, elevate it on the political agenda and stimulate new developments.

Competition: when schemes overlap and compete for participants and sources of funding, and fail to share resources and knowledge, maintaining status quo rather than expanding range and scope of activities.

Substitution: when one source of funding simply replaces another without resulting in an increase in participation rates, or when the introduction of a new scheme is used by funding authorities as an excuse to cut back on funding from other sources.

The identification of the four models of interplay in the 2012 study was mainly a heuristic exercise, and no dedicated study has been undertaken since to underpin this with more solid evidence. Nevertheless, the findings of the study, coupled with the discussions in the Expert Group, indicate that any introduction of a new scheme in a national context would need to be accompanied by a careful analysis of potential overlaps and their consequences – both positive and negative – and that both planning and the implementation phases need to be monitored carefully and activities coordinated to the largest extent possible. Even when there are no direct overlaps, the relationship between schemes should nevertheless be analysed, and assumptions challenged.

In a “toolbox” containing examples of good practice from across Europe to underpin the proposed new Recommendation¹⁴, the Expert Group have identified a case from Belgium, where the national mobility scheme *Bel’J* has supported youth exchanges, youth volunteering projects and exchanges of youth workers between the three linguistic communities in the country since 2009. The adoption of the regulation establishing the ESC in 2018 with the possibility to organise “in-country” activities gave rise to concerns about the possibilities of overlap between the ESC and the national scheme. Because of these concerns, the three NAs of Belgium elaborated a note with guidelines on how this should be tackled. Taking its point of departure in an analysis of possible overlaps in activities, target groups, financing models and administrative procedures, the note outlines five possible approaches to addressing the issue of complementarity at community level:

1. To implement both programmes alongside each other without consideration of possible overlaps
2. To ensure an integral approach by having all activities that overlap fall within the *Bel’J* and all others within the ESC
3. To modify the national programme *Bel’J* and remove all strands that overlap with the ESC
4. To allocate the budgets of *Bel’J* to the ESC
5. To allow the programmes to run alongside each other in their present forms, but to try and achieve coherence (rather than complementarity) through youth policies.

¹³ European Commission, Study on Mobility Developments in School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Adult Education and Youth Exchanges, 2012, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/70b9de14-a3a4-4623-9d5c-d0e6ced9b280>

¹⁴ European Commission, [Promoting the mobility of young volunteers and cross-border solidarity](https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/50effcd2-271e-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-234133276), 2021, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/50effcd2-271e-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-234133276>.

Given the decentralised nature of Belgian youth policies, it is up to each community to decide for itself how it wants to address the issue of complementarity between the programmes (with the exception of the third scenario, which would require agreement between the communities). With this exercise, the communities were provided with a range of options on which to base their decision. However, at the time the first option was preferred, but the model offers a useful framework for discussions on how to address both the positive and negative aspects of the interplay.

Aspects of complementarity and synergy

The major – and most straightforward – aspect of complementarity and synergy is related to funding. Funds from national/regional schemes may be used to co-finance ESC-activities (or vice versa), but if they can be used to cover the same budget items, and/or if no clear percentages are agreed between provisions of national and European funding, there is a risk of double funding and hence a misappropriation of funds. If, on the other hand, activities are strictly separated, beneficiaries will opt for the scheme that offers the most generous financing, and funds from other schemes risk going unused (*competition*). This again may lead to these being scrapped (*substitution*). To avoid these situations requires communication and coordination at political and/or administrative level along the lines of the last four of the five options identified in the context of the Belgian *Bel’J* programme.

In the perspective of complementarity and synergy between European and national/regional schemes, there are, however, other aspects which require attention. These are concerned with *quality, information and awareness*, and *other formats of volunteering*.

Quality

It may be difficult to agree on joint quality criteria in a field of such diversity as volunteering and solidarity. Depending on whether a scheme is perceived at meso-level (from the perspective of community impact) or at micro-level (from the perspective of participants’ learning outcomes), the idea of what constitutes “a good project” may vary considerably.

However, at the level of the individual participants, it is important that they can be assured that participation in volunteering and other solidarity activities is underpinned by certain quality principles relating to issues like health, safety and protection as well as preparation, monitoring, and debriefing. This is all the more important in relation to cross-border volunteering, where participants are away from home and in an environment where the usual safeguards are not necessarily in place. Given the popularity of “voluntourism” – i.e., for-profit volunteering schemes, where commercial agencies offer volunteering stays abroad against a fee – quality may also be seen quite simply in terms of consumer protection: of ensuring that clients are not sold a commodity that is defective or in other ways not worth the resources invested in it.

Many funding schemes for volunteering and solidarity – like the ESC – have thus defined their own quality criteria in the shape of a “Quality label” that organisations applying for funding for activities must sign up to, but these do not extend beyond the activities funded by the scheme. As a result, implementing organisations may have to apply for several different quality labels, if they work with funding from different schemes in their palette of activities. When introducing a new scheme, it may therefore be beneficial to compare and align any quality criteria with those that exist within other schemes in the field, to ensure that there is a common understanding of the concept, and that quality labels are similar.

There are no Member States where a uniform set of quality criteria have been introduced that cover across the board. At European level, the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of

Europe in the field of Youth recently published a “Handbook on Quality in Learning Mobility”¹⁵ which focuses on transnational mobility activities undertaken for learning purposes outside of the formal education and training system, also subsuming cross-border volunteering. Here, the concept is fleshed out in 22 overarching principles and no less than 119 quality indicators in order to set a benchmark of what “quality” implies in this context. Again, this is not prescriptive, but meant as a guide for the elaboration of quality criteria at national level.

Information and awareness

Where potential participants have the possibility to choose between several options of engaging in volunteering and solidarity activities, it is essential that they have access to objective information and guidance so that they make a choice that best complies with their situation and personal profile. Also, this information should be readily available and sufficiently personalised, so that also persons who would not normally consider themselves the target group for a particular activity (e.g., young people with fewer opportunities in relation to long-term, cross-border volunteering) are encouraged to participate.

Access to information is in itself not necessarily the problem, as there is a plethora of information sources and channels available both at national and European level. However, information changes and updates vary quickly, and as new formats are continuously being developed, the reliability of information is often hard to assess. Going directly to the organisation and agencies that implement the activities or carry out the coordination and administration of schemes may be difficult, and at times these only have information on the activities and schemes that they run, and not the full overview of all options. Therefore, when introducing a new scheme, some thinking must be devoted to how this increased complexity in information provision should be tackled.

The idea of a “one-stop-shop” for youth information, where users can get an overview of all the options and information on conditions and requirements for participation has taken root in many Member States in the shape of self-standing youth information centres. Here, young people can get information either through physical encounters, telephone, email and/or electronic media¹⁶. Some Member States have specialised information services for cross-border opportunities, e.g., the *Bureau International Jeunesse* (BIJ) for the French-speaking part of Belgium. BIJ also coordinates a number of national and European mobility programmes and schemes in the field of youth (including the ESC) and are thus able to offer direct guidance as well as practical assistance in relation to these¹⁷.

Other formats of volunteering

In the ESC, a fairly broad range of activities can be supported, but there are restrictions both in terms of participants, geography and use of funding, which may in some cases disqualify otherwise deserving projects from getting support. Such restrictions need not apply in national or regional schemes, however, which may be predicated on a different logic, and which hence may complement provisions in the ESC. An obvious restriction of the ESC lies in its identity as a youth programme, which means that participation is only possible for people up to the age of 30¹⁸.

So called “intergenerational volunteering and solidarity” is a growing phenomenon, which subsumes several types of volunteering. There have in the course of the ESC and its predecessor, the European

¹⁵ European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth, Handbook on Quality in Learning Mobility, 2019, Council of Europe Publishing, <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/Handbook+LM/3a5c103c-0367-4eba-1aca-ee544826f557>.

¹⁶ For an overview of youth information centres in Europe, see <https://www.eryica.org/our-network>.

¹⁷ <https://www.lebij.be/>

¹⁸ For the recently included Humanitarian Strand, however, the age limit is 35.

Voluntary Service (EVS), been many examples of projects where young people volunteer to help older citizens with various challenges, but the concept also encompasses projects where participants are both under and over the age of 30, and also projects where older people provide support for young people. A good example is furnished by the Spanish *Cibervoluntarios*¹⁹, which offers help to people who are challenged by ICT. Cibervoluntarios started up as a project but has now developed into an organisation. It does not operate with any age limits neither for volunteers nor target groups, and hence needs to finance its activities from many different sources.

¹⁹ [Cibervoluntarios](#)