European Solidarity Corps inputs for 2024 Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

We welcome the Public Consultation that the European Commission launched in November 2023 on the European Solidarity Corps Programme, for the interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 programme and the final evaluation of the 2018-2020 programme.

This document is a joint initiative to respond to the EC Public Consultation and was elaborated by a consortium of European Networks engaged with the European Solidarity Corps Programme. This initiative counted with contributions from the following organisations:

Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organizations (ALLIANCE)

Centre for European Volunteering (CEV)

Confederation of European Senior Expert Services (CESES)

European Disability Forum (EDF)

European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL)

European Youth Forum (YFJ)

Network of European Voluntary Service Organisations (NEVSO)

Samaritan International

It builds in particular on the work done in collaboration with the SNAC (Strategic National Agencies' Cooperation) and in the framework of the ESC Resource Centre Advisory Group where some of the involved organisations are represented.

We agree with the conclusions and sentiments expressed in the SNAC paper "Better Conditions for 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 Agencies 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"

And also with the main **suggestions to:**

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.

In addition, and building on the fact that EU programmes with a Solidarity and values focus are crucial for our times, as well as the continued need for strengthening civil society in a context of shrinking civic space, we have the following suggestions to broaden and strengthen the impact of the European Solidarity Corps in the coming years.

1. General Comments

1.1 2021 Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers.

In order to strengthen the impact, outreach and quality of the ESC programme all aspects of the Recommendation should be applied to the ESC.

1.2 European Year of Volunteers 2025 and a comprehensive European Civic Engagement & Volunteering Strategy (ECEVS)

The European Year of Volunteers in 2025 is an excellent opportunity to build perfectly on the achievements of the European Year of Youth 2022 and European Year of Education and Training 2023/2024 as well as **prepare for the 10th anniversary of the ESC in 2026.** This will make a huge contribution in keeping the focus on volunteering and active civic engagement as a central element of the European Project. Placing the **ESC inside a wider EU engagement/ volunteering strategy** will ensure that it makes an even stronger contribution to the follow up of the Conference on the Future of the European Union and the sustainability of the EU project and the upholding of EU Values.

1.3 In-Country Activities

The possibility for young people to engage in in-country activities, including those involving movement away from original home locations, has made an outstanding contribution to increasing the diversity of ESC members and facilitating access to the programme for hard to reach and vulnerable groups and should therefore be maintained, encouraged and increased. This is especially important for young people with fewer opportunities and those in countries where the tradition and culture of volunteering is not so

strong as well as in those countries where euroscepticism is prevalent and/or becoming more prevalent. In-country activities can also be an important boost to national volunteering and solidarity programmes as volunteering can become more visible through the presence of volunteers from other countries acting in collaboration with the local in-country volunteers.

The full costs for in-country volunteers should be covered at the same rate as international volunteers, including insurance-related costs. Furthermore, it should be a volunteer's own choice to take this route based on their own personal circumstances and should not be used as a cost cutting measure. We agree that the European component should be foremost in the project activities and this should be maintained as a clear requirement in the rules.

1.4 Access for organisations

Progress in making the process of access to funding more straightforward and accessible should continue in order to avoid any possibility that organisations choose not to participate in the programme or no longer wish to participate in the programme. The ESC should continue to aim to achieve growth in the number of volunteers and reliability in the use of funds. Sustained support to long-term, well-established reliable providers of volunteering opportunities in particular, would contribute to reaching this aim in an efficient and effective way.

Better provisions regarding the access of European Networks access to funding should be established and the possibility to apply to centralised calls should be made available in order to better realise the potential of these important networks with large outreach and multiplier potential. (See point 1.8).

1.5 Governance of the programme

The ESC Resource Centre Advisory Group should be maintained and strengthened and the feasibility of an overall ESC Advisory Council made up of interested stakeholders should be looked at with a view to making it part of the ESC Legal basis. The ESC Resource Centre Advisory Group and possible future ESC Advisory Council would represent good practice in involving a range of stakeholders in the guidance and oversight of the ongoing programme implementation. Furthermore, the European Youth Forum should be included as an observer without voting rights in the Programme Committee responsible for the management of the European Solidarity Corps; hence foreseeing this in the rules of procedures of the relevant Committee. At the national level, the bodies in charge of implementing the programme should include representatives from the country's Civil Society, for example National Youth Council and/ or representatives from the national volunteering/ solidarity & youth networks as well as other significant civil society organisations in the ESC field, in their governing structures and evaluation processes. The USB sound board is an example of good practice and should be continued and even extended to annual physical meetings between all stakeholders (volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, etc) to discuss the ongoing implementation and future of the programme.

1.6 Funding

In order to boost the impact of the ESC and increase access to any unused Erasmus Plus funds, in particular circumstances it should be possible for NAs to easily transfer unused funds from Erasmus plus to ESC whilst keeping both programmes well separated in terms of identity and main focus i.e Solidarity for ESC and learning for Erasmus Plus. Since both are part of the youth strategy the ultimate beneficiary group for the funds does not change. It should also be possible for unused ESC funds in one NA to be easily transferred to others who have higher demands and quickly exhaust their budgets. This will increase access and impact as well as reducing waste in administrative and other resources.

Inflation needs to be taken into account in the flat rates and lump sums that despite recent increases remain inadequate and quality is suffering as a result. They need to be urgently increased so that difficult choices about choosing volunteers without extra needs (such as an accompanying person) in preference to those with particular needs do not need to be made and the best candidates can be chosen on merit.

The change in approach for 2024 as concerns the caps for the coordination costs for organisations which was 4,500 euros is very welcome as it was far too low and much lower than for other EU programmes. The removal marks a positive change and will facilitate better quality in the programme.

However, since the overall budget has not been increased and together with the increase in unit costs bringing them more in line with the actual costs, could lead to the risk/ reality that fewer young people will be able to access the programme. To counteract this, the overall budget for the ESC must be significantly increased. We suggest that it should at least be tripled to take into account the relative decrease that we saw with the change from the transition period of (3 years) to the full 7 year MFF without fully taking into account the increased timeframe as well as the over demand that is seen overall.

1.6.1 Funding for inclusion

The funds need to continue to be increased in line with inflation to enable the projects to develop and involve in a property way without any decrease in quality as well as ensuring that they are being more inclusive. It is of great concern that at the current funding rates, without high co-financing from non-EU sources it is very challenging to reach the target group of young people with fewer opportunities due to the additional expenses required in terms of practical and personal/ emotional support.

1.6.2 Funding for Volunteering Team leader

For good quality volunteering teams projects it is important to have good leadership for the group in each activity. The impact of this aspect of the ESC programme could be significantly strengthened by the inclusion of a specific budget allowance for the team leader who can be of any age in projects funded at both centralised and decentralised levels. This would also have a positive outcome for the inclusion and diversity of the Team's activities. Inspiration and guidance on how best to include this aspect can be taken from established practice in the team volunteering/ workcamp field.

1.6.3 Funding for Mentorship within ESC

A specific budget line devoted to the constant improvement and coordination of the mentoring scheme should be allocated and recognised. This additional financial support should be given besides the funding support allocated to reinforced mentorship and should not replace or include it, as it addresses a different need than the one of integration of youth with fewer opportunities. This budget should be devoted to NAs to implement activities supporting the development and training of mentors; and to organisations, throughout the project, supporting their activities for a successful mentoring structure and approach (See Point 2.7).[1]

1.7 Perception of the ESC

In order for ESC to properly establish itself after the discontinuation of EVS as a brand, engaged organisations should be required and better supported to advertise the ESC, describing them in the databases with their logo and descriptions. In addition, it should be considered good practice for organisations to also implement appropriate co-branding through their own channels or to generally advertise a full time volunteering placement, volunteering teams placement and/or solidarity project, rather than being limited to the closed environment of the Youth Portal, and in this way at the same time as recruiting participants for the ESC increased visibility and knowledge of the programme is achieved.

Current perceptions of ESC focus on the programme as an opportunity exclusively for young people. Further focus should be applied to the opportunities for intergenerational cooperation within ESC, through the advertising and publication of the potential for mentoring as a method of engaging other citizens of all ages, but particularly experienced seniors, in the context of ESC. This would strengthen the perception of ESC as a collaborative, community focused programme with the scope for involvement of all citizens, complimenting the activities of young ESC volunteers that are directly funded by the programme.

Better use and access to the volunteer card that grants ESC Volunteers access to events, etc would help enormously with recognition and visibility for the ESC programme in the wider public. This can be at least in part achieved by linking the acquisitions of the card to the Pass Tool rather than the Beneficiary Module because sometimes there are delays with that which prevents the volunteers getting in the card in good time.

1.8 Centralised Actions

The possibility for European NGOs who have successfully acquired the ESC Quality Label to apply centrally for funds in EACEA should continue and be strengthened. It should be extended beyond European Teams and Humanitarian Aid projects and also include Individual volunteering and solidarity

[1] Pintea, C., Ples, M., & Markovic, D. (n.d.). Mentoring And Coaching Within The European Solidarity Corps Common Practices Under Research. In https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4435/Mentoring%20Report%2020230517.pdf.

projects to be implemented anywhere in Europe by volunteers from across Europe or from a given country. The criteria to acquire the Quality Label should not be linked to capacity for local impact only in the country where legally registered but rather to the geographical framework to which they operate in Europe.

European Organisations and Networks would like to be more fully engaged in the ESC but struggle due to the obstacle of applying for national project calls especially in relation to requirements to demonstrate effective local impact only in one country (i.e. the country where the organisation is legally registered). There is therefore the need for more centralised calls that could allow those organisations to fully realise their potential in the ESC and in doing so strengthen the outreach and impact of the programme implementing projects across their membership and networks in a number of countries, not only the one where they are legally based.

1.9 Consistency across the NAs

Applications for funding can currently be submitted to the different NAs but this practice is handled differently in the various NAs which leads to a weakened impact of the programme overall. In order to avoid discussions between NAs and providers regarding applications and budgets, applications for hosting and supporting in and from programme countries as well as in and from partner countries should be equally accepted and promoted, as is also provided for in the programme guidelines. A corresponding clarity in the communication towards the executing agencies, based on the applicable regulations, should be strived for. This should be handled transparently and with clarity with regards to the responsibilities of each stakeholder (NA, Commission, NGOs, etc).

1.10 Increasing support to acquire co-financing for lead, hosting and supporting organisations

Due to co-financing requirements of the programmes, engaging sponsors, gaining grants, and other forms of co-financing for the organisations involved is becoming more needed and with proper support could become a common practice in all aspects of the ESC programme including Solidarity Projects, which can be especially attractive to possible funders, in order to continue to ensure the proper quality of the volunteering activities in challenging times.

Organisations that choose to contribute financially to these projects should be able to determine the amount of donations depending on the costs and should provide transparent information to interested parties in order to ensure fairness. In addition to financing, these donor entities also have a great potential to publicise the ESC volunteer programme.

Participation in the ESC should remain free of charge for the volunteers and this fact should be monitored by the NAs to ensure that the rule is fully respected. Any donations from ESC volunteers to the organisations involved in their placements should be voluntary per se; reaching a certain donation level should not be a prerequisite for voluntary service including membership fees of supporting, hosting and/ or lead organisations. In all cases it should be clearly communicated to the volunteers that this is not a

compulsory contribution for participation but can also be a part of the pedagogical experience in a positive way as fundraising requires volunteers to speak up about their volunteer project and gain visibility for it whilst promoting EU projects and EU values often to new audiences. This assures the inclusivity of the programme, especially for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, to whom any requirement to invest their own resources in the experience presents a significant barrier to participation and inclusion.

Note: The most common form of co-financing is via staff time of the involved organisations. More research is needed to understand the true amount of this co-financing and therefore know the true cost of the programme and overall value for money it offers for the objectives.

1.11 Funding & Status for online activities

An increased amount of funding should be available for online activities in line with the offline funding. The opportunities for **fully funded** blended activities should be explored and developed in order to improve capacities to reach a bigger diversity of target groups when it is the choice of the volunteers concerned. Currently, online activities have a lower funding rate than face to face ones whilst the costs of implementation are the same, if not greater when online. As a result of a better administration of the available funds, some should be redirected to developing this sort of activity. Furthermore, digital communication costs should also be kept in mind at the time of funding these activities, as it is essential for creating successful projects.

Limited funding for online activities hinders the proper implementation and quality of these activities. This is especially relevant when considering Inclusion and Disability related costs, which should be supported at the same rate as face-to-face activities, as participants are present when online.

1.12 Medical expenses & Insurance

We welcome the change in Insurance provider to the current provider Henner. It is important that insurance for organisations to protect against expenses incurred for medical reasons is eligible and the amounts of funding increased in order to cover this cost. Nonetheless, the accessibility and general opinion of the programme can be improved with better systems for insurance that don't require advance payments and have clear information concerning what is covered and what is not covered.

The signing up procedure needs to be clearer and more agile to reduce the risks of incomplete insurance coverage activation, as well as to take into account "last minute" enrollment in projects, up to the last day before the starting date.

The access to the EU Health Insurance Card should be made easier and more streamlined across the Member States, if it is to remain a requirement for participants. Countries should be supported to make the procedure for obtaining the card a real reality for all eligible volunteers as this is not the case at the moment and creates an additional barrier to participation.

Insurance coverage should be guaranteed also in cases of volunteers with disabilities who may require

specialised care. We reiterate the fact that for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, any requirement to invest their own resources in the experience presents a significant barrier to participation and inclusion.

1.13 Country geographical participation of non-programme countries

The current situation is preventing organisations from non-programme countries to fully engage in the ESC opportunities as in the past. This situation should be addressed and EU candidate and accession countries in particular as well as other neighbouring countries should be fully part of the ESC programme. This growth of engagement and outreach should be matched with a corresponding increase in funding to take into account the increased scope of the programme. Visa procedures where required should be facilitated and streamlined for ESC opportunities (See point 2.6).

1.14 IT and online Platform

The current version of the IT tools need to be improved in order to better facilitate the good quality ESC programme cycle. The possibility for lead and hosting organisations to filter and search for potential applicants should be introduced. In addition, ESC Volunteers should be able to better track their applications and understand the status of each one, especially if the process is closed and another candidate has already been selected. These improvements will increase engagement and interaction in the platform, increase diversity in the selection process for candidates and help maintain the motivation of ESC members that receive repeated rejections.

An updated version of the IT tools should include all models within ESC, not only individual volunteering. Moreover, it should facilitate information about candidates' motivation, rather than only their CVs allowing for better matches in the programme. User Sounding Board (USB) should be continued as an important resource to get back proper feedback and testing before rolling out any updated version.

The IT tools used for application reporting should be reliable, user friendly and comply with the Accessibility rules as indicated by the EU Web Directive on the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications.

1.15 Accessibility & Inclusion

The ESC has formally committed to strive for Inclusion in Art.13 of the Regulation. Therefore Guidelines for Inclusion & Diversity Strategy have been developed by the European Commission that have been transposed in each Programme country into their own Inclusion and Diversity Strategy. To allow this commitment to become real the ESC programme should ensure that:

- Promotional materials are developed in multiple formats including Easy to Read, Sign language and all video materials are subtitled. Moreover, the actors of the promo materials represent the diversity of participants.
- Information about the measures available are visible and easily accessible on the Commissions site, the Youth Portal as well as on each NA's website.

- The websites, documents and applications used by volunteers, organisations are in compliance with the EU Directive on the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications.
- The European Commission and National Agencies provide training to their staff on Inclusion Accessible Communication Websites and Mobile Application to ensure that Inclusive materials, methods & responses are provided.
- The European Commission and the National Agencies make available data regarding participation of each under-represented group of the people with fewer opportunities so that the inclusion can be really followed up on and improved based on an accurate assessment of evidence.

2. Individual Volunteering

2.1 Improving the administration of project funding

The NA should allocate fixed quotas to organisations with the quality label, which can fluctuate +/- x% per year. In order to give the organisations long-term security, such quotas should have commitments over several years. Reducing uncertainty, would notably improve the organisations' funding administration, specially in relation to voluntary placements, administrative costs and personnel costs, but also in international partner cooperation. Such improvement in the administration would also help solve difficulties at the time of involving organisations from partner countries, as a more effective administration of the funds would give the opportunity to create specific windows with additional funding for the partner regions.

2.2 Abolishing the maximum funding rule when it exists in certain NAs

Putting an end to the maximum funding rule when it exists would mean that larger organisations in the ESC would have an incentive or the opportunity to expand their programme, enter into cooperation with other host organisations, further develop their profile, make their work more professional and ultimately enable more young people to be part of the ESC in individual volunteering projects. The maximum funding amount and the subsequent limitation of the number of participants make the ESC uneconomical for some organisations which leads to organisations dropping out of the programme or shying away from joining. At programme level, this can lead to funding not being fully utilised and steps should be taken to avoid this and ensure that the full potential of the programme is reached.

The funding limit hinders the proper implementation of a truly inclusive programme, mainly for long term volunteering, when Young People with Disabilities with high support needs are concerned. The disability related costs may faster reach the funding limit, which as consequence may cause a shortening of the project, against the will of the concerned volunteer and organisation, or in certain cases postpone or abandon the project altogether.

2.3 Involving young people with fewer opportunities

The budget destined to involve young people with fewer opportunities must increase in order to be able to provide proper support before, during and after the volunteering experiences. This support needs to

take into account not only material goods purchased, but also any additional staff and volunteer time required for this process from the organisations involved.

There should be a greater effort employed in raising awareness amongst young people from these groups (fewer opportunities, disadvantaged backgrounds) about the programme.

Much more flexibility should be allowed in individual volunteering projects to be able to engage for a maximum of 12 months but with different combinations of placements. **It would be preferable that young people are not restricted to a limited number of individual mobilities, only to a maximum of 12 months in their lifetime so that they can "mix and match" countries, topics, experiences etc. For now they are limited to one "long term" mobility over two months which is not inclusive at all for those who cannot commit to a long term placement at once.** Furthermore, young people should be able and encouraged to participate in as many Volunteering Teams activities and Solidarity projects as they wish and are accepted to, as a way to encourage more inclusion and diversity of engagement in the programme.

2.4 Improving the overall coordination and quality of the volunteering placements

Voluntary Service Organisations could conduct the necessary compulsory ESC preparatory/ supportive seminars for their volunteers themselves. In doing so, they pick up on the content priorities of the EU programme and can, at the same time, set their own priorities and topics, thus contributing to ensuring a diverse content orientation. The organisations should be provided with flat-rate funds for this effort. In parallel, the NA offers a seminar programme for volunteers from organisations or volunteer agencies that cannot or do not want to conduct seminars themselves. The introduction of this two-pronged approach would increase efficiency and avoid delays in placements due to the timing of the training provided by the NAs. EU Values and the EU context should, nevertheless, remain an integral part of the training which unfortunately is often not the case.

Another possibility for change would be the accreditation procedure for projects to be greatly simplified, shortened and made available in all EU languages. Voluntary Service Organisations should be able to submit applications on behalf of the deployment sites. This would make accreditation visits to all deployment sites no longer necessary. The usual procedure could be retained for projects that work without coordinating Voluntary Service Organisations. This type of cooperation would significantly increase the number of interested placement sites and improve the programme efficiency reducing the administrative burden for all.

Note: The content-related supervision of volunteers and assignment locations – as far as it exists— is the responsibility of the executing organisations/lead organisations.

2.5 Clarification of the role of support organisations

The role of support organisations needs to be clarified, especially for the young people involved in the programme. There is currently no financial incentive for organisations to act as support organisations. In

order to avoid unprepared volunteers and drop-outs, a suitable pedagogical preparation is necessary before departure by the support organisations. This would lead to more commitment, fewer difficulties in the settling-in phase and thus to fewer programme terminations. This rather "weak" role of the support organisation also means that assistance to returning volunteers to continue that active citizenship engagement as volunteers is limited. Experience shows that 100€/day/participant would be an adequate amount of funding to run a high-quality pre-departure seminar. There should be binding standards on duration, content and remuneration/subsidy rates for the support organisations' departure seminars.

Note: Recommendations for the minimum amount that host organisations pay their partner organisations (support organisations) that provide preparation would be desirable. This is absent from the current programme leading to reluctance to engage and a reduction in quality of the preparation phase.

Note: In cooperation with countries where there can be no support organisations due to state repression against civil society (currently e.g. Belarus and Russia), a formal support organisation should not be a prerequisite if its tasks can be fulfilled by a sponsoring organisation or in the host country.

2.6 Participation of third country nationals and legal residents in the EU in the ESC

There is a need to address visa challenges of volunteers taking part in the ESC programme that do not come from Schengen countries. In several cases, it becomes a determining fact as it is impossible for host organisations to support the volunteers in acquiring their visa, particularly in countries with restrictive visa policies such as Belgium, de facto hindering the inclusivity of the programme. Specific financial and legal support should be provided for ESC placements and projects involving third country nationals or legal residents in the EU, young people from Erasmus+ Programme and Partner Countries, as well as for young refugees. This support could also include the development of a special visa category for ESC participants with fast-track, free of charge visa procedure. Specific training for embassy and consulate staff charged with allocating visas should be provided.

Requirements for organisations to sign for legal responsibility for any expenses related to visa overstays should be monitored for any negative impact on inclusion, engagement and diversity in the programme and mitigating processes for this to be established.

2.7 Strengthening Mentorship within ESC

The role of mentors within ESC is a crucial one, supporting young people in often unfamiliar situations, however a lack of common understanding of the role of mentors, an uneven application of mentorship among NGOs, and an under-publication of such mentoring opportunities, has led to a vast underutilisation of a hugely beneficial resource. A deeper, and more importantly commonly agreed, understanding of mentoring and the benefits particularly within the ESC context, is essential in showcasing its value to organisations, ESC volunteers, and potential mentors themselves. A better

understanding of the value of mentoring, especially intergenerational mentoring, should be complemented with the correct support, training, and guidance on attracting and maintaining mentors offered to organisations.

Recent research on mentorship recommends a paradigm shift from relying on individual mentors to relying on a mentoring system that is implemented to support the volunteer throughout its experience.[2] This approach requires clear definition of roles and profiles of the mentors involved in this system and adequate training for anyone involved in the mentoring process should be included as part of the ESC Quality Label and provided via the ESC portal and/or in face-to-face opportunities offered by NAs.[3]

A specific budget devoted to the constant improvement and coordination of the mentoring process should be allocated at centralised level and with sufficient funds for all training and certification of ESC mentors and other support persons.

3. Solidarity Projects

3.1 Making the Solidarity Projects more accessible

The application process should be made much easier, shorter, faster and more accessible with more frequent deadlines to really be able to target inspirational groups of young people with great ideas about how to support needs in their communities. Upgrading to an inclusive procedure with easy to understand language in the EU national languages would be necessary as well as a simplification of the procedures for outreach organisations, and/or the possibility of carrying out applications from lead organisations for host organisations. This would tackle the problem of the complexity of the questions as the 123 page guideline is not a sufficient help. Introducing the possibility of applications via media other than written text applications should be explored and more trust placed in the ability of young people to implement their own projects based on the needs they see around them. The age for participation in Solidarity Projects should be reduced to 16.

[2] Pintea, C., Ples, M., & Markovic, D. (n.d.). Mentoring And Coaching Within The European Solidarity Corps Common Practices Under Research. In *https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-4435/Mentoring%20Report%2020230517.pdf*.

[3] "EVS Realm: Masters of the Learning Path - Policy Recommendations for Improved ESC Quality" https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_ce961158ae3f4c0fb83b58f5e91fdd8f.pdf?index=true

4. Humanitarian Aid Strand

4.1 Accessibility of the programme

The current age and experience related requirements of the Humanitarian Aid Strand present challenges to the fundamental concept of the project as part of a youth strategy, as well as to the learning outcomes logic of ESC.

The age limit of the programme is too low if it is to consider qualified volunteers. The experience and age requirements are not aligned, making it difficult to find adequate candidates. The possibility to have expert leaders of any age in the projects should be maintained.

4.2 Improving the administration of volunteers and project design

There are concerns among organisations engaged in the Humanitarian Aid Strand of the programme regarding the costs, quality and risks associated with volunteers external to the organisations and, more generally, to the Humanitarian Aid framework. These volunteers require higher amounts of training, which is already being implemented at a low pace, delaying possible deployment (See point 5.3).

Thus, established providers of organised volunteering opportunities that already have access to a pool of **qualified volunteers** should be able to design deployment projects for these qualified volunteers, provided they have the skills required to fulfil the deployment's objective. This would imply the possibility to partially skip the open call for volunteers and focus more on the purpose and content of the project, rather than on the individual's mobility.

4.3 Improving the pace of training and completion of deployments

So far there have been low levels of actual deployments within the Humanitarian Aid Strand of the programme. This is mainly due to the higher cost of the volunteers (See point 5.4), as well as to the slow pace of the required training and security briefings for volunteers. As a consequence, a lot of organisations engaged in the Humanitarian Aid Strand of the programme have not yet completed a full deployment of volunteers.

The training process should be more agile, faster and more effective in meeting the demands of the programme.

4.4 Funding

The budget available is not appropriate for the costs associated with Humanitarian Aid deployments and should be increased. The costs associated with volunteer management in global deployments are significantly higher than the lump sums available for organisational support, even beyond what can be expected as "own contribution" or co-financing.

4.5 Participation of third country nationals in the Humanitarian Aid Strand of the Programme

The current programme is only outgoing, not allowing incoming volunteers, which in turn results in lack of reciprocity of the programme. To counteract this reality, the programme should allow the participation of volunteers especially from candidate or neighbourhood countries as a way to provide support to civil society in these countries by way of volunteering exchange, as well as to add value to the projects.