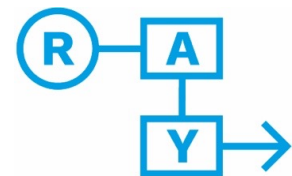


A CLOSER LOOK AT SOLIDARITY PROJECTS



RAY Factsheet developed by Johannes Eick and Tanja Strecker



After its second thematic study on the European Solidarity Corps in 2023, the RAY¹ transnational research team completed an explorative study to take a closer look at Solidarity Projects. Its aim was to gain an initial understanding of the many dimensions of this rather exceptional strand within the European Youth Programmes and to identify further lines of research. Over the course of eight interviews, 12 participants from different European countries shared their first-hand experiences with 24 different Solidarity Projects.



WHY SOLIDARITY PROJECTS?

Participants perceive Solidarity Projects as powerful catalysts for putting social concepts into practice. The prospect of sufficient funding for volunteering projects encourages new creative development processes as well as the realisation of long-standing ideas. While some of these activities would have been implemented even without the benefits of being a Solidarity Project, the opportunity to secure funding for workshops and trips, cooperate with experts, and receive consultation from coaches and National Agencies helped to accelerate the projects to new heights. It's no surprise that our interviewees show a strong sense of agency and engage in multiple follow-up activities, another indicator for the high level of satisfaction with this particular strand of the European Solidarity Corps. With new ideas continually emerging, most participants started to develop additional activities not explicitly mentioned in their project application. Furthermore, they began to prepare applications for additional projects over the course of their ongoing project.

“It was a complete game-changer I would say!”

WHAT IS THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL SOLIDARITY PROJECTS?

Young people sit in the driver's seat of Solidarity Projects, and at times, this responsibility falls particularly on one individual. In our interviews, we found that some of the project ideas stem primarily only from one person. They act as the legal representative, take the lead on assembling a more or less fluctuating team, coordinate activities, and manage the bureaucratic aspects involved. The weight of responsibility is a consistent presence for some of those who drive Solidarity Projects. Fortunately, they can tap into meaningful support from various sources such as the National Agency or the coach. The National Agency proves helpful for general information and bureaucratic issues, while the coach takes a hands-on, active role in the projects.

¹ <https://www.researchyouth.net>

For instance, they provide networks of experts and concrete recommendations for workshop development, event management or planning trips. Thus, multiple interviewees strongly emphasised the positive influence of coaches in their experiences. Furthermore, nearly all of the projects examined applied through a support organisation rather than an informal group. In some cases, the organisation played an even more significant role, serving not only as a supportive actor but as the primary responsible entity.

“I have like this long list of notes of like necessary e-mails or web-sites or dates or different places that I need to remember. Because I need to remember those things. The other team members they can take it easy. ((Interviewer: you took the lead on this)) Yeah cause I’m like the legal representative so like if they start to ask questions I’m supposed to know how to answer them.”

“Our Coach is like our mother, she has so many ideas, such big IQ how to fix problems.”

WHAT IS CHALLENGING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The fact that Solidarity Projects are such a distinct type of project leads to specific challenges for the youth involved. While the stakeholders in our second thematic RAY SOC study highlighted bureaucracy and high thresholds as challenging for youth engaging in Solidarity Projects, the participants in this study were more focused on group dynamics and successfully reaching participants for their activities. Addressing group dynamics proved to be a multifaceted challenge, including tasks such as finding other youth to build a group, sustaining group cohesion for more than a year with the realities of daily life, making decisions in large groups, and adapting to new hierarchies imposed by the presence of a legal representative in the group. Several interviewees reflected critically on the issue of political support, with some struggling to receive any support at all from their municipality while others had difficulties overcoming the limitations the offered support imposed. However, in other cases, the support of the municipality was described in very positive terms, and the municipality was even the driving force behind one project. Since some of the interviewees correlate the lack of support with a failure to acknowledge the importance of their work and expertise, a direct link is established not only to their political participation but also to their broader community impact extending beyond the confines of their specific projects.

“My dream is that someday the municipality and the local stakeholders will count NGOs that implement projects in the local community they will count those NGOs as equal parts of the town and the city and maybe ask them before take actions in the city. (...)”

“Because I think with all those young people that we have, we have very creative minds, very creative and fresh ideas and we can actively be part in the life of the city as a municipality does.”

WHAT ABOUT INCLUSION?

The emphasis on inclusion, a priority of the European Solidarity Corp's programme, can be evaluated in the context of Solidarity Projects on three levels: 1) applicants, 2) participants and 3) impact. When considering the applicants, nearly all of the participants in this explorative study appeared to be very resourceful, fluent in English, and actively engaged in higher education. While several interviewees identified as belonging to a minority group, they seemed to enjoy relative privilege across other dimensions of social inequality. When it comes to reaching applicants, promotion and visibility are generally seen as key factors in achieving a successful outcome. Our interviewees got involved with Solidarity Projects in various ways. Several made the connection through a support organisation or a friend, while two individuals approached their municipalities seeking funding opportunities.

On a participant level, it is important to note that several interviewees struggled to reach certain target groups, such as youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). In contrast, the interviewees identifying themselves as part of the minority group they aimed to engage did not face any challenges in this regard. This observation suggests that increasing the number of YWFO as applicants may also be instrumental in boosting their engagement as project participants.

On an impact level, it became apparent that the inclusiveness of a community or society as a whole could be increased. All our interviewees mentioned some thematic link to inclusion, whether it was through engagement with a certain target group, the creation of products geared toward improved accessibility for people with disabilities, or efforts aimed at fostering greater acceptance of mental health issues within the community. The interviewees either believed they had achieved these objectives or were optimistic about accomplishing them through specific strategies.

In summary, inclusion remains a significant challenge for Solidarity Projects, especially at the applicant level. However, it's worth noting that Solidarity Projects also provide compelling examples of inclusiveness, which could serve as valuable insights to inform and improve the European Youth Programmes in general.

“Yes, we had this fear of how many people will participate and how can we reach more people.”

WHAT BENEFITS DO YOUNG PEOPLE DERIVE?

When asked about the effects of their Solidarity Project experiences on themselves, the interviewees report a diverse range of impacts. These include skill enhancement, such as improved project management and facilitation skills, better handling of bureaucracy, and increased knowledge of the European Youth Programmes overall. In addition, they mention personal growth, such as higher levels of self-confidence or being more outgoing, as well as social benefits, such as making new friends or boosting teamwork skills.

The most remarkable sentiment, however, is the strong sense of self-efficacy that the interviewees convey in their stories. Nearly all of them expressed satisfaction in having a positive impact on their project participants and/or their community. These immensely encouraging and motivating experiences align well with the aforementioned sense of agency: young people believe they can actually do something meaningful, so they do it.

“Right now I’m very happy that I’m participating. (...) For the first time in my life I actually felt like I have good influence on someone and people actually came there to participate in our activities and I felt we do something important for the local community”

WHAT FURTHER IMPACT DO SOLIDARITY PROJECTS HAVE?

All interviewees were very positive when speaking about the impact of their projects, with some envisioning a substantial influence on all levels, in addition to the personal impact previously mentioned.

PARTICIPANTS	COMMUNITY/LOCALITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shifts in attitudes, awareness, skills and behaviour regarding the projects’ concrete topics as well as volunteering and active participation in society at large • socialise, have fun, and get the chance to take part in special events not usually offered • participate in the European youth programmes and other opportunities for youth to engage and go abroad • meet important people and expand network of connections • change your life positively, for example new options for studying, finding a job, becoming an entrepreneur 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tackle community and societal issues • build and strengthen communities, in particular through the engagement of more individuals for the community’s needs and the creation and strengthening of networks of organisations • improve the locality’s image, increasing its visibility and promoting it • promote concrete events or local products, in particular sustainable offers • improve physical appearance and reduce pollution, for example through tree planting • create new jobs and small businesses
ORGANISATIONS/NETWORKS	SOCIETY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grow in volunteers, staff and influence • enhance and strengthen networks • become more inclusive, economically sustainable and able to tackle societal issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achieve improvements in alignment with programme priorities • exert positive influence on local policies • improve youth’s standing in society by showing what young people are capable of when they get the chance

Although common evaluation tools such as feedback forms or the assessment of social media outreach were also employed, the methods for gauging impact were often tailor-made according to the specifics of the project.

Some illustrative examples include instances where people did not request consultation for the same issue twice, the number of printed outputs taken, the influx of additional volunteers into the project or organisation, or offers for collaborations and requests for advice.

“Every individual is a member of a local community or a bigger community and even if we can affect one person to learn him something or to affect him in another way I don’t know, this will have an impact in society because this individual is member of this society and this individual will have an effect in society.”

RESEARCH OUTLOOK

This explorative study has highlighted the remarkable diversity of projects, activities, methods and approaches encompassed under the umbrella of Solidarity Projects. The initial insights outlined above also pave the way for several lines of future research.

STATE-OF-THE-ART

- quantitative data on the projects regarding topics, objectives, contents, activities and methods
- (missing) beneficiary and applicant profiles

INCLUSION

- thresholds to participation for under-represented applicants
- inclusiveness of selection processes
- target groups for outreach activities and existing obstacles
- the role of organisations

GROUP DYNAMICS

- youth’s reasons and motivations for developing a project
- organisational structure within the team and its effect on both young people and the project implementation
- distribution of responsibilities and internal hierarchies

CHALLENGES & SUPPORT STRUCTURES

- support needs and offers
- roles of different actors, such as coaches, support organisations, national agency staff etc.

Further research on impact should consider the mentioned levels: impact on applicants, participants, organisations, community and society.

READ ALONG

- 1st thematic study Solidarity Corps: <https://researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/01-RAY-Report-20200608.pdf>
- 2nd thematic study Solidarity Corps: <https://www.researchyouth.net/reports/#soc>
- Other RAY research reports: <https://www.researchyouth.net/reports/>
- Publications by Salto Solidarity: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity/>