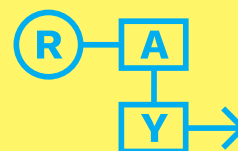


**RAY-
NPC**



Research-based
analysis of European
youth programmes

The impact and potential of cooperation projects with neighbouring partner countries in the European youth programmes

In cooperation with



BEYOND BORDERS
Neighbours together

Written by

Andrea Horta Herranz

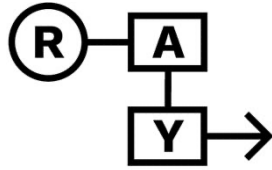
with

**Ashley Pitschmann
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**Research
report**

November 2024





Research-based
analysis of European
youth programmes



BEYOND BORDERS
Neighbours together

RAY-NPC

**EXPLORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE IMPACT
AND POTENTIAL OF COOPERATION PROJECTS WITH
NEIGHBOURING PARTNER COUNTRIES IN
THE EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMMES**

RESEARCH REPORT

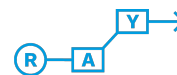
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Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.

 **EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS**
THE POWER OF TOGETHER.

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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cooperation projects between programme countries (EU Member States¹ and third countries associated with the programmes²) and neighbouring partner countries (third countries not associated with the Programme that are neighbouring the EU)³ are a special case in the European Youth Programmes and one which should be protected and supported. The findings in this report show how they expand the exceptional benefits of the programmes into regions bordering the EU, helping to build a stronger, more cohesive, and more inclusive youth sector that benefits everyone involved (sections 3 and 7). The findings show that cooperation projects provide invaluable international non-formal learning experiences for young people, including young people with fewer opportunities, resulting in them emphasising how meaningful and positive their experiences were, even when asked for critical feedback (section 5).

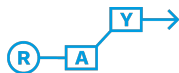
The findings also reveal that cooperation projects do exceptionally well at making participants feel closer to Europe (section 7.1) and that they have a slightly stronger focus on Europe and democracy than other projects within the programmes, highlighting the relevance of these themes when programme and partner beneficiaries collaborate (section 4). Additionally, beneficiaries as well as participants involved in cooperation projects have a special interest in bringing value to people and communities beyond themselves (section 2). At the youth field level, the findings reveal that cooperation projects effectively contribute to the professional development of beneficiaries and youth workers and also promote the recognition of their work. These projects foster the creation of youth strategies and youth policies by connecting the civil society actors working at the national level to develop them and by providing access to strategies, standards, and good practices that can serve as inspiration (section 7.3). Furthermore, the findings present a striking example of how the international social connections among individuals and civil society actors created through cooperation projects extend beyond the projects themselves (section 7.2). Beneficiaries from programme and partner countries report that their partnerships are positive, constructive, and mutually beneficial, showing a clear desire and motivation to continue partnering with each other in the future (section 6.1).

In summary, cooperation projects successfully integrate beneficiaries and young people from partner countries into the European Youth Programmes, benefiting all those involved and cultivating social connections based on European values across programme and partner

¹ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

² Liechtenstein, Iceland, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Turkey

³ Third countries not associated with the Programme that are neighbouring the EU have been clustered into several regions, of which this project will cover four: Region 1: Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosova, Montenegro); Region 2: Neighbourhood East (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine); Region 3: South-Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia); Region 4: Russian Federation (Russia). For other regions, see <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/eligible-countries>



regions. To sustain this valuable initiative, it is imperative to address the needs for support expressed by youth workers and beneficiaries and to take into account the feedback shared by young people (section 8). The most critical needs identified include better financial support for programme components (section 8.1) (echoed by young participants); the need to give partner country beneficiaries the opportunity to apply for additional key actions (section 6.2); and the need to improve, monitor, and regulate budgets and contractual obligations within the European Solidarity Corps (section 8.5) (also emphasised by young participants). Based on these and other needs and feedback gathered in this report, we present the following recommendations to support cooperation projects in the future:

INCREASE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Both beneficiaries and young participants observed that the current grant amounts do not adequately cover daily expenses, proper accommodation, travel expenses (particularly where budget airlines are not available), and other project components (section 8.1)

GIVE PARTNER COUNTRY BENEFICIARIES EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO APPLY

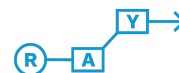
It is daunting and frustrating for partner country beneficiaries to have to prove their worth to programme country beneficiaries in order to participate in key action one, key action two and volunteering projects. The situation also discourages newcomers from partner countries from participating and diminishes diversity in cooperation projects (section 6.2).

PROVIDE MORE BUDGETING GUIDANCE IN THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

Beneficiaries report that project contracts within the European Solidarity Corps are not always drafted in a manner that clearly or fairly outlines the duties, obligations, and budgets for each party. This often leaves partner country beneficiaries in particular at a disadvantage, as they are unable to apply directly to the programme and must either accept or reject an unfavourable contract, as opposed to drafting a contract themselves as a coordinating organisation (section 8.6).

ENHANCE VETTING AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

Both volunteers and hosting beneficiaries express a desire for stronger support mechanisms to address conflicts that may arise over the duration of a project. Volunteers underline the need to ensure that organisations can provide a comfortable and safe living and working environment, as well as the importance of access to an active contact person outside the hosting beneficiary who can ensure their wellbeing. Hosting beneficiaries, on the other hand, highlight the need for support in cases where volunteer behaviour is destructive to the beneficiary or their interests (section 8.5).



PROVIDE SUPPORT WITH APPLICATION WRITING

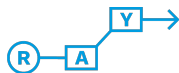
Beneficiaries express the need for assistance with application writing (section 8.2). This support could be provided by National Agencies, regional SALTOS, or Contact Points/Info Centres through the creation of dedicated application workshops for beneficiaries in project and partner countries, as well as by showcasing exemplary applications for reference.

PROVIDE SUPPORT WITH INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES AND VISA PROCEDURES

Beneficiaries in cooperation projects report struggling with intercultural challenges specific to the region where the project is hosted and with obtaining visas for all participants who require them (sections 8.3 and 8.4). Participants could benefit from a space within the programmes open for them to network and exchange experiences and know-how with other beneficiaries who have successfully completed a project in the same region or gone through similar visa procedures. This could be a virtual or physical space, or both.

IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

The percentage of young participants from rural areas in neighbouring partner countries is as low as that of young participants from rural areas in programme countries (section 3.1). This means that the effort to reach rural and remote areas should extend to beneficiaries in partner regions. Part of this effort includes making the projects more enticing for beneficiaries by offering grants well-adapted to the projects (section 8.1) and by eliminating the need for partner country beneficiaries to prove their worth to programme country beneficiaries to participate (section 6.2).



1. INTRODUCTION

RAY NPC is an explorative research project on the impact and potential of cooperation projects with neighbouring partner countries in the European youth programmes. It is conducted by the RAY Network in close cooperation with BEYOND BORDERS, the Long-term Strategic Activity on Neighbouring Partner Countries (LTSA NPC) of the regional SALTO Resource Centres and Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies⁴. The key objectives of RAY NPC are to explore:

- The effects of cooperation projects on project participants and project teams, but also their organisations and communities;
- Access to the European youth programmes in general, and specifically neighbourhood cooperation projects, at the level of young people as well as organisations, networks, and groups;
- The profiles of project participants and project teams involved in cooperation projects with neighbouring partner countries;
- The needs of project teams and their organisations, networks, and groups in relation to working with the European youth programmes, specifically in cooperation projects;
- The differences between cooperation projects and other projects within the European youth programmes.

RAY NPC addresses these key objectives using three research modules involving a dedicated analysis from monitoring data from the RAY Network's monitoring survey, a thematic survey for organisational contact persons and project leaders with a focus on addressing RAY NPC key objectives, and three focus groups with organisational contact persons and project coordinators for the same purpose. The reader can find specific information about these methods in Section 9 (methods Section).

1.1. HOW TO APPROACH THIS REPORT

The report integrates and summarises the findings of these three research modules, culminating in specific recommendations for the improvement and support of cooperation projects. The concluding summary and recommendations can be found at the beginning, before this introduction, for ease of access. We advise the reader to use the table of contents or the cross-references in the summary to navigate the thematic Sections 2 through 0, which provide a detailed account of the findings of RAY NPC. Each Section concludes with a short and succinct overview of the key take-home messages titled “What do these findings mean?”. These subsections are meant to assist readers of all skill levels in making sense of the findings in the Section as well as to provide a simple way to skim through the findings of the report.

⁴ Find out more about BEYOND BORDERS – NEIGHBOURS TOGETHER at beyondb.eu.



2. MOTIVES TO JOIN COOPERATION PROJECTS

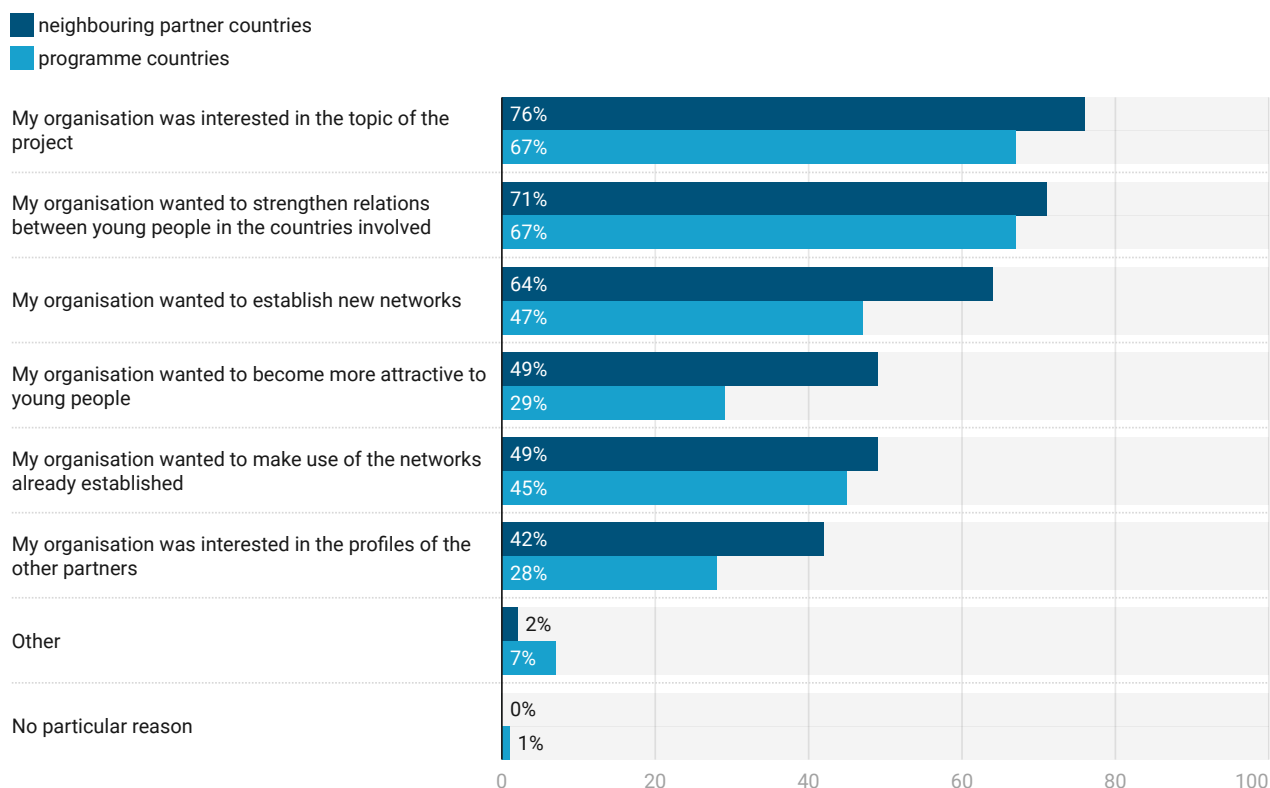
2.1. BENEFICIARIES' MOTIVES TO JOIN

Beneficiary organisations join cooperation projects motivated by the project topic and the goal of strengthening relations between young people in the countries involved. The motivation to become more attractive to young people and that of networking is stronger for beneficiaries from partner countries.

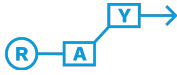
The two reasons selected most often by respondents when asked why their organisations joined their last cooperation project were, “My organisation was interested in the topic of the project” and “To strengthen relations between young people in the countries involved”. This was true for both respondents based in programme countries and those based in partner countries (Figure 1). This suggests that, particularly in the context of youth exchanges and volunteering projects, beneficiaries’ primary consideration is delivering value to project participants through specific, meaningful project activities.

Figure 1. Beneficiaries' motivations to join cooperation projects

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons from programme and partner countries involved in cooperation projects within E+ and ESC. Nnpc=63; Npc=146. Q:What was the motivation to become involved in the project?



Multiple choice question, no particular reason exclusive
 Source: RAY NPC thematic survey (2024)



In addition, they focus on fostering social ties between participants from programme and partner countries, aligning closely with the objectives of cooperation projects. For programme country beneficiaries, this focus takes precedence over a more organisation-oriented, strategic motivation to join cooperation projects. It is clear that they selected motives related to organisational networking less often than those related to bringing value to individual participants. The pattern also holds true for respondents from partner countries, but the difference between their participant-oriented motivations and their strategic/organisation-oriented motivations is smaller.

Additionally, partner country beneficiaries appear to show more interest in the profiles of programme country beneficiaries than vice versa. This may be a by-product of the current limitations which prevent partner country beneficiaries from directly applying for most key actions themselves, requiring them to gain the attention of programme country beneficiaries in order to join projects. Such an effort may lead to increased familiarity, and therefore interest, in the partners of a project. If this is true, it would represent one way in which the current restrictions on participation of beneficiaries from partner countries contribute to power imbalances and frustration in forming partnerships, as discussed in Section 6.2.

The biggest difference in responses from programme and partner countries is related to the motivation “To become more attractive to young people”. A relatively small proportion of programme country beneficiaries selected this as a motivation, as compared to nearly half of partner country beneficiaries. This most likely reflects a belief among programme country beneficiaries that cooperation projects will not necessarily appeal more to young people than other projects within the European youth programmes. For partner country beneficiaries, however, it may indicate a perception that the European youth programmes present a uniquely attractive opportunity for young people in their specific contexts.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS’ MOTIVES TO JOIN

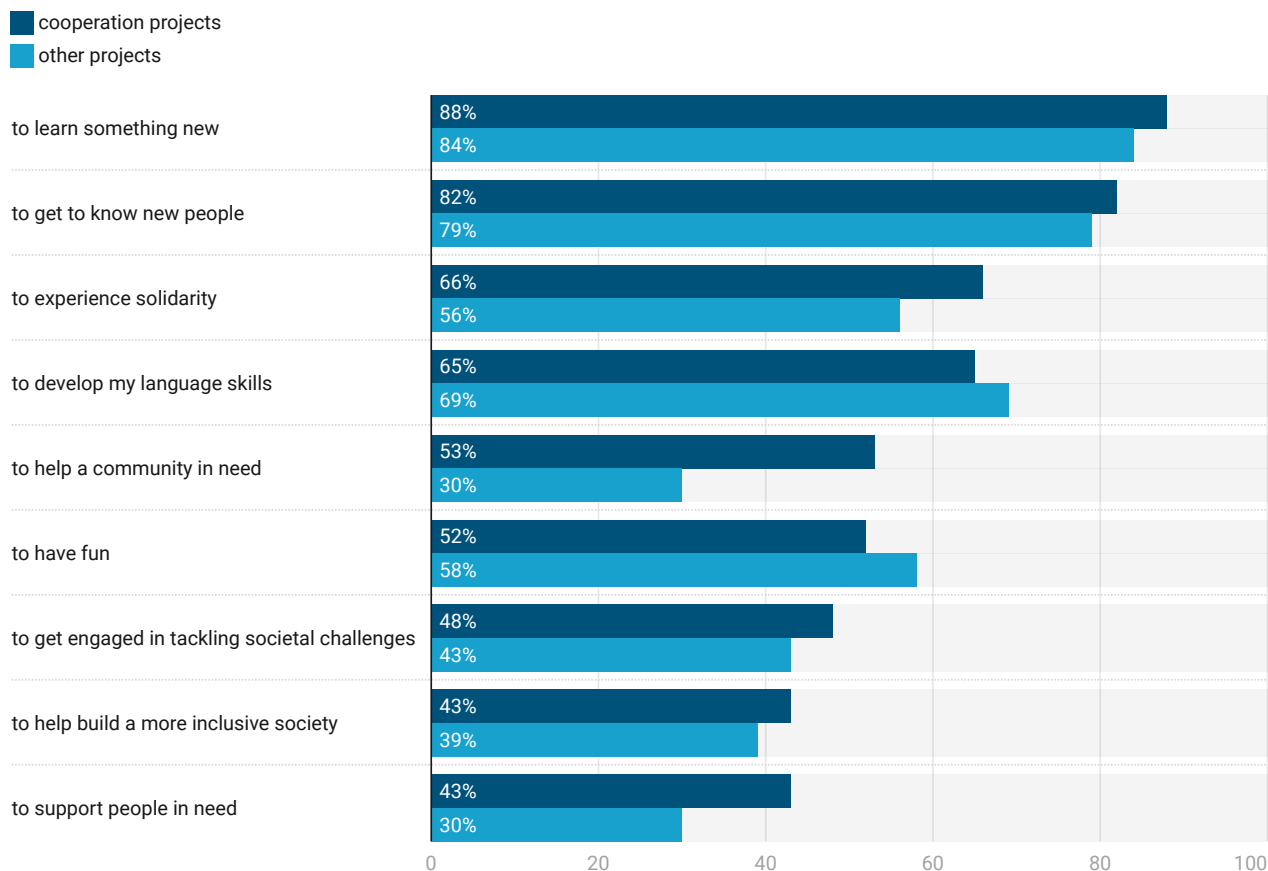
Motivations to join for participants in cooperation projects and those of other projects are very similar, with the aim to experience and learn new things being the most common motivation. The only difference: participants in cooperation projects were more likely to volunteer for the purpose of helping others.

Most young people join key action one and volunteering projects with the desire to experience and learn new things, and to meet new people and cultures. Reasons such as challenging oneself, developing specific skills, exploring the specific project topic, or supporting a specific community come second to the interest in experiencing something new. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 16 (see annex A in Section 10.1), this is true in both programmes and for participants in cooperation projects as well as those in other projects.

Only one difference in motivations between these two groups of participants becomes apparent: a larger percentage of participants in cooperation projects selected reasons related to helping others as the motivation to join their volunteering projects (“to help a community in need” and “to support people in need”). In other words, in the European Solidarity Corps, participants of cooperation projects seem more often focused on creating value that goes beyond their personal benefit than participants of other projects.

Figure 2. Participants' motivation to join the European Solidarity Corps

Responses of project participants (individual and team volunteering) in cooperation projects and other projects. Ncoop = 466; Nother = 2155. Q:My reasons for taking part in this project were...



Multiple choice question
Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

Beneficiaries and participants of cooperation projects join with a special motivation to cultivate intercultural relations and to create value that extends beyond their personal benefit. For participants, this motivation means that more of them report wanting to help people and communities in need as a reason to do volunteering (when compared to participants not in cooperation projects). For beneficiaries, this motivation translates to a stronger focus on the project’s specific topic and on building connections between young people in the involved countries, with fewer citing strategic organisational objectives, such as networking or increasing appeal to young people, as primary motivations.

3. PROJECT ACCESSIBILITY

3.1. SIMILAR TARGET GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS REGIONS

The programmes have a similar level of accessibility and a similar target group in both programme and partner countries.

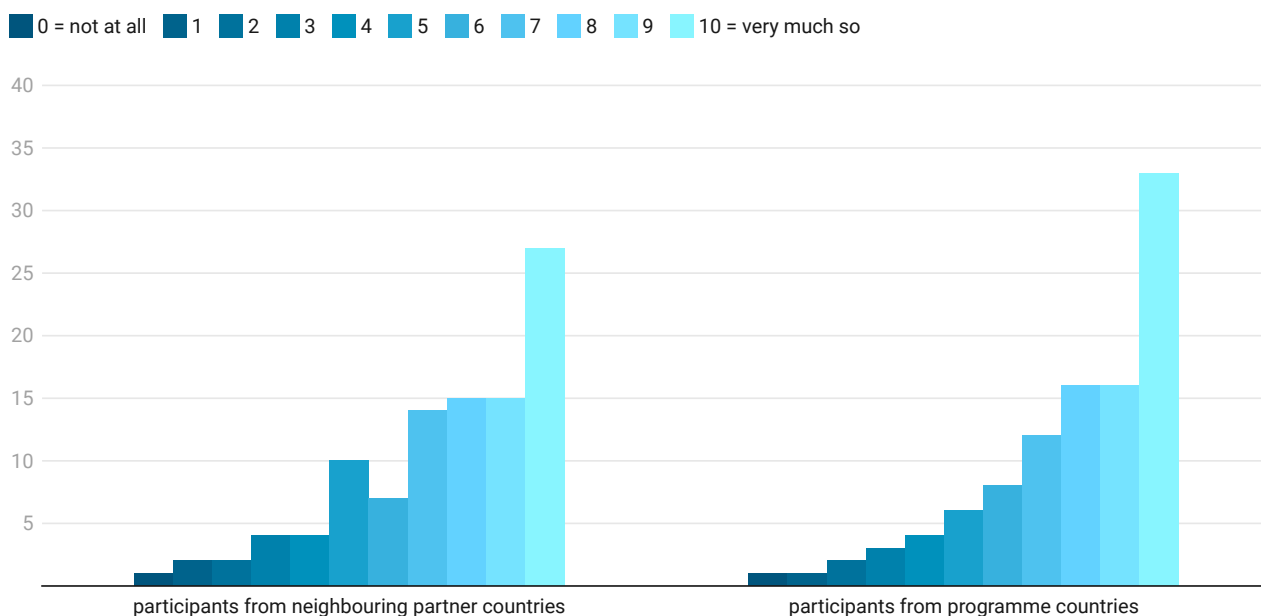
There were no large differences in the general socioeconomic background or levels of programme accessibility between Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps participants residing in neighbouring partner countries and those in programme countries.

The proportion of newcomers (64%) and repeat participants was consistent among young people from both partner and programme countries in the European Solidarity Corps, with similar trends in Erasmus+, although there were slightly more newcomers from partner countries (50% vs 44%). When asked how easy it was to afford participation in the programmes (Figure 3), participants also gave similar ratings across groups (mean rating scale 0-10; ESC programme: 7,6 ESC partner: 7,1; E+ programme: 8 E+ partner: 7,5), with a slightly higher percentage of participants from programme countries finding their projects very easy to afford.

As regards urban or rural origins, the vast majority of participants come from urban areas, with only 13% to 19% from rural backgrounds. The pattern is similar for participants from both partner countries and programme countries.

Figure 3. Affordability of Erasmus + projects for participants

Responses from participants in youth exchanges, youth dialogues and youth participation activities. Y axis shows percent of participants. Nnpc=588; Npc=6979. Q:How easy was it for you to afford participating in the project?



11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10. Mean = 7,5 (NPC pax) and 8 (PC pax). Median = 8 (NPC pax) and 8 (PC pax).

Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)



Figure 4. Participants' area of residence

Answers from project participants. E+: Nnpc=588, Npc=6979; ESC: Nnpc=360, Npc=226. Q: Which of the following phrases best describes the area where you live?

■ NA ■ A farm or home in the countryside ■ A country village ■ The suburbs or outskirts of a big city ■ A town or small city ■ A big city

Erasmus+

Participants from neighbouring partner countries



Participants from programme countries



European Solidarity Corps

Participants from neighbouring partner countries



Participants from programme countries



Single choice question

Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

If we look at their experience of facing barriers to reach their full potential, participants from both partner and programme countries also respond very similarly, with a slightly (4%) higher percentage of participants from partner countries indicating that they face barriers – both in Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. With regards to the specific social barrier of discrimination, most (69% to 72%) participants across both groups would not describe themselves as belonging to a group that is discriminated against.

Please refer to annex B, in Section 10.2 to see all comparison graphs.

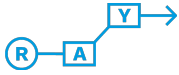
3.2. ACCESSIBILITY FOR PARTNER COUNTRIES IMPROVED OVER TIME

Partner country beneficiaries believe the programmes have become more accessible to them but also perceive more instances of abuse of the system.

Partner country beneficiaries report that the programmes have become more accessible to them over time. They attribute this improvement to more lenient entry conditions, broader eligibility for capacity building initiatives for youth, and better planning thanks to Erasmus+ accreditation. However, this easier access may have also led, in some areas, to an increase in applications driven by profit motives without a focus on quality.

“In general, I have the feeling that there are more projects with partner countries and I think the accreditation makes it easier. Even if we are not able to get accredited, it makes it easier for us to plan in advance.” – Focus group participant⁵

⁵ Quotes from the focus group discussions throughout the report were extracted from written summaries of the interactions. This means that they may not reproduce the original words of the speaker exactly, even though this was the intention when producing the written summary.



WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

These findings suggest that the programmes effectively appeal to, and are able to reach, similar audiences in programme and partner countries. As a result, the familiar challenges and achievements related to programme reach and inclusion are likely to hold true for its implementation outside of programme countries. Key challenges include ensuring that the programmes are accessible for young people in rural areas and for those with fewer opportunities. On a positive note, overall accessibility for beneficiaries from partner countries appears to have improved over time.



4. PROJECT TOPICS

4.1. FOCUS ON EUROPE, DEMOCRACY AND INCLUSION

Key action one cooperation projects more often focus on topics related to European identity, European values, and democracy as compared to other projects.

In the monitoring survey, project topic frequencies of key action one cooperation projects and those of other key action one projects are almost the same. The salient differences have to do with project topics related to European identity, democracy, and European values, in particular inclusion. These project topics appear more often in cooperation projects than in other projects, both when looking at Youth Worker Mobilities and when looking at youth exchanges.

In youth exchanges, the topic of “European identity, citizenship and values” was reported in 24% of cooperation projects, compared to only 15% of other projects, “Inclusion of marginalised young people” was a topic in 20% of cooperation youth exchanges, while it only appeared in 14% of other youth exchanges and the “Bridging intercultural, intergenerational and social divide” was a topic in 14% of cooperation youth exchanges compared to 8% of other youth exchanges. All other differences in topic frequency between cooperation and other youth exchanges were less than 6% (Figure 5).

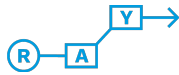
Figure 5. Frequency of project topics (youth exchanges)

Frequency of project topics of Youth Exchanges for cooperation projects and other projects based on project participants' and project leaders' metadata (percent of projects with a specific topic). Ncoop=2630; Nother=6548.

	COOPERATION PROJECTS		OTHER PROJECTS	
		percent of projects		percent of projects
21 to 30%	Creativity, arts and culture	31%	Creativity, arts and culture	26%
	Environment and climate change	23%	Environment and climate change	27%
	European identity, citizenship and values	24%		
11 to 20%	Physical and mental health, well-being	16%	Physical and mental health, well-being	20%
	Green skills	16%	Green skills	16%
	Inclusion of marginalised young people	20%	Inclusion of marginalised young people	14%
	Bridging intercultural, intergenerational and social divide	14%	European identity, citizenship and values	15%
			Key competences development	11%
7 to 10%	Democracy and inclusive democratic participation	10%	Democracy and inclusive democratic participation	9%
	Preventing racism and discrimination	10%	Preventing racism and discrimination	7%
	Digital skills and competences	8%	Digital skills and competences	8%
	Community development	8%	Community development	10%
			Bridging intercultural, intergenerational and social divide	8%
	Key competences development	9%	Entrepreneurial learning - entrepreneurship education	7%
	Human rights and rule of law	7%		
Cultural heritage	7%			
5 to 6%	Youth employability	5%	Youth employability	5%
	Promoting gender equality	6%	Digital content, technologies and practices	5%
			Development of disadvantaged rural and urban areas	5%
			Cultural heritage	6%
		Awareness about the European Union	6%	
4%	Quality and innovation of youth work	4%	Quality and innovation of youth work	4%
	Media literacy and tackling disinformation	4%	Media literacy and tackling disinformation	4%
	Prevention of conflicts, post-conflict rehabilitation	4%	Human rights and rule of law	4%
	New learning and teaching methods and approaches	4%		
	Preventing radicalisation	4%		
	Entrepreneurial learning - entrepreneurship education	4%		
Digital content, technologies and practices	4%			

The rest of the topics appear on 3% or less of the projects
Differences of 6% or more are highlighted in bold

Each youth exchange is assigned a maximum of three topics from a pre-defined list.
 Source: [RAY Monitoring Survey \(2024\)](#) · [Get the data](#)



For Youth Worker Mobilities, “Democracy and inclusive participation” was a topic in 12% of cooperation projects and 7% of other projects. It appeared to take the place of “Creativity, arts and culture”, which was the only other topic with a frequency difference of 5% or more and appeared a lot less often in cooperation projects (8%) than in other projects (14%). (Figure 20 in annex C, Section 10.3)

Moreover, a relatively high percentage of thematic survey respondents, especially those from neighbouring partner countries, shared that their projects helped improve their understanding of methods for participation and active citizenship as well as their understanding of Europe and the European Union (Figure 13, Section 7.1).

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

Together, these findings underscore how cooperation projects differ from other projects within the European youth programmes: they are more often explicitly dedicated to educating on Europe, democracy, and European values. There seems to be an intrinsic motivation from youth workers and young people to raise these topics specifically in the context of collaboration across programme borders. In other words: these results point to a bottom-up demand for the integration and kind of dialogue that cooperation projects are trying to achieve.



5. OVERALL PROJECT ASSESSMENT

5.1. HIGH SATISFACTION, MEANINGFUL PROJECTS

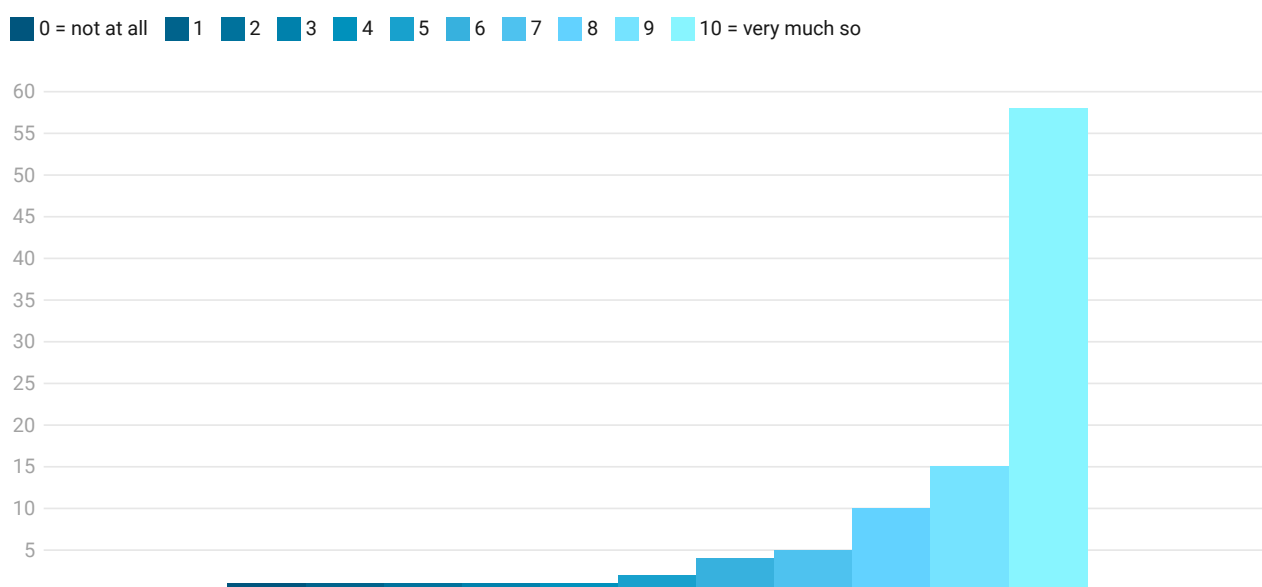
Beneficiary organisations, project leaders, and project participants universally report high levels of satisfaction with cooperation projects. Participants find cooperation projects very meaningful.

90% of project leaders and organisational contact persons indicated being satisfied with their last cooperation project within Erasmus+ or the European Solidarity Corps. When it comes to project participants, they too indicated high levels of satisfaction with regards to project enjoyment and perceived project meaningfulness, similar to those of participants from other projects.

The mean rating of how much participants enjoyed cooperation projects was 9 (median: 10) on a scale from 0 to 10 for Erasmus+ (Figure 6). This question was not posed to participants in the European Solidarity Corps, but they were asked about project meaningfulness. As shown in Figure 7, the mean meaningfulness rating on the same scale was 8,5 in both the European Solidarity Corps (median: 9,5) and Erasmus+ (median: 10) for participants of cooperation projects. It ranged from 8 to 8,5 (medians: 9 to 10) when analysing participants from programme and partner countries separately.

Figure 6. Participants' enjoyment of cooperation projects in Erasmus+

Responses from participants in cooperation projects within Erasmus+. Y axis shows percent of participants. N=1812. Q:How much did you enjoy participating in the project?

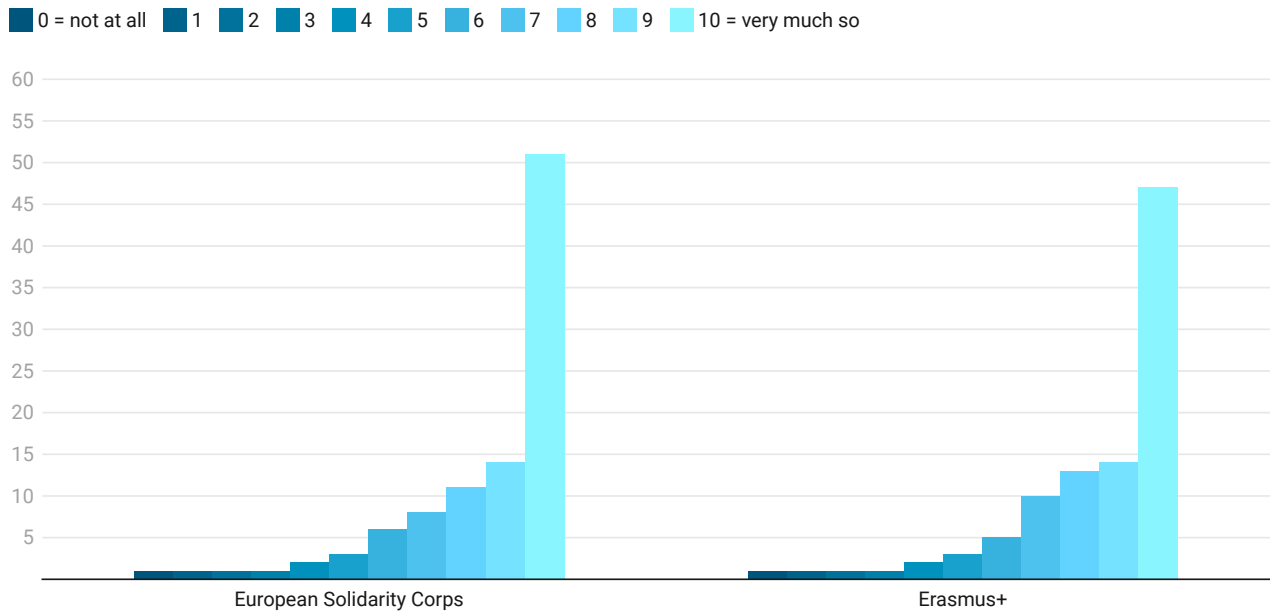


11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10. Mean = 9. Median = 10.

Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Figure 7. Meaningfulness of cooperation projects for participants

Responses from participants in cooperation projects. Y axis shows percent of participants. E+: N=1812; ESC: N=466.
Q: How meaningful was the project for you?



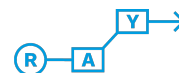
11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10. Mean = 8,5 (E+) and 8,5 (ESC). Median = 9 (E+) and 10 (ESC).
Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Further evidence that participants were happy with their projects and found them meaningful comes from the open answer question on the monitoring survey prompting participants to share what they would improve in the programme in which they just participated. In spite of the question being a request for improvement (“What, if anything, would you improve about the Erasmus+/European Solidarity Corps Youth Programme?”), 19% of Erasmus+ participants and 15% of those in the European Solidarity Corps who responded took the opportunity to express appreciation and/or stress how meaningful the experience was for them.

“Nothing at all. My experience helped me see the world in a much more human light. In myself I found so much empathy, understanding, patience and love that I never even knew existed. I feel so much closer to the world now, and far less alienated.” – Monitoring survey respondent

“This experience has changed my life. Thank you so much for such opportunity. What you guys are doing is amazing. I’m so glad I had a chance to participate in such project.” – Monitoring survey respondent

“To have more volunteering opportunities for people from my country Jordan, it’s a life changing experience” – Monitoring survey respondent



WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

These findings reveal that the main actors and stakeholders at the implementation level of the programmes are clearly satisfied with cooperation projects. They also confirm that cooperation projects succeed in creating positive and very impactful experiences for young people.

6. PARTNERSHIP DYNAMICS AND PROGRAMME ENVIRONMENTS

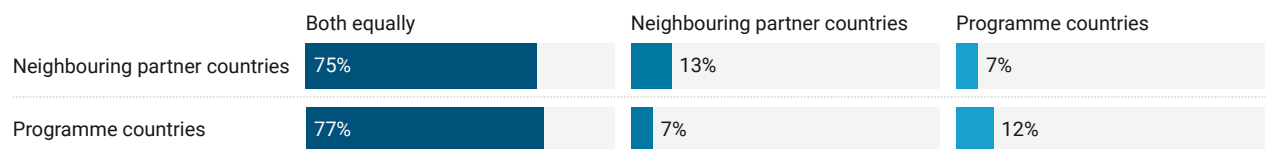
6.1. POSITIVE, EQUAL-BENEFIT, SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS

Partnership dynamics within projects are positive and constructive. Programme and partner countries benefit equally from the projects.

Over 70% of thematic survey respondents agreed that partners from programme and partner countries benefited equally from their most recent projects. The small percentage who answered differently believed that partners like themselves benefitted more. Specifically, most partner country respondents who perceived an imbalance indicated that partner countries benefit more, and vice versa. Notably, almost none (7%) of the respondents of the thematic survey thought partners such as themselves were at a disadvantage when it comes to benefitting from their last project (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Beneficiaries' assessment of who benefited most from their last cooperation project

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons from programme and partner countries involved in cooperation projects within E+ and ESC. Nnpc=63; Npc=146. Q: Who benefited more from your specific project?



Source: RAY NPC thematic survey (2024)

Additionally, respondents of the thematic survey were prompted to write three adjectives that describe the partnership dynamics of their last cooperation project from their perspective. Analysis of these answers show that overall, partnerships appear to have been highly cooperative and friendly, with an emphasis on communication, trust, and diversity.

They allowed for mutual learning and growth, fostered respect and empathy, and were generally positive and productive. Words depicting challenges or tension (such as “challenging”, “unbalanced” or “suspicious”) appear very seldom; they comprise only 2% of the total sample of words. Refer to Figure 9 on the next page for a word cloud depicting the most frequently used terms.

Figure 9. Word cloud: Partnership dynamics

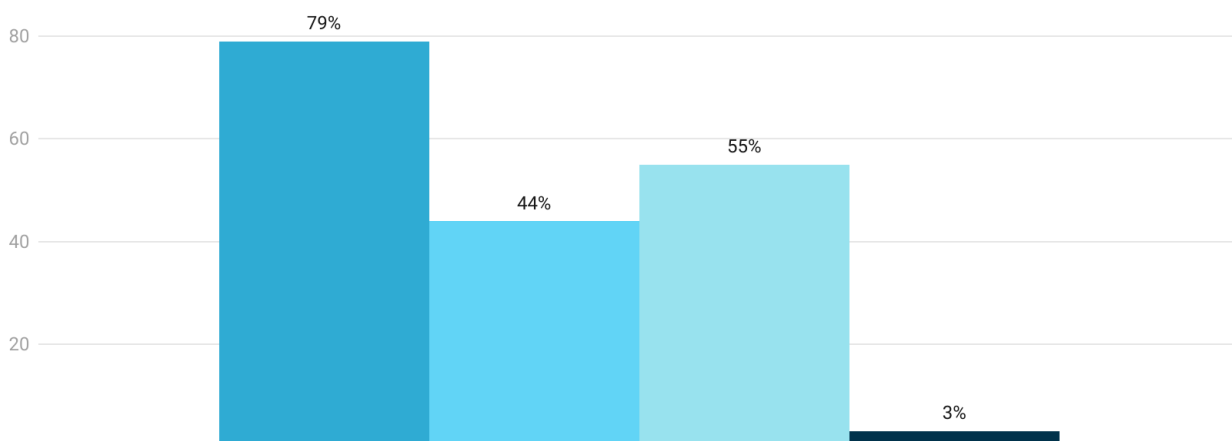


Given these positive evaluations of partnerships, it is not surprising to learn that a majority (79%) of thematic survey respondents from programme countries agreed that their organisation would like to develop more projects with neighbouring partner countries in the future (Figure 10). This reinforces the idea that collaboration between beneficiaries of programme and partner countries is sustainable.

Figure 10. Future cooperation intentions of programme country beneficiaries

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons from programme countries involved in cooperation projects within E+ and ESC. N=146. Q: After this project, in my organisation, we...

- want to organise more projects with neighbouring partner countries
- want to involve more neighbouring partner countries in existing projects
- would like to try other project formats with neighbouring partner countries
- other



Multiple choice question
 Source: RAY NPC Thematic survey (2024)

6.2. PARTNER COUNTRY RESTRICTIONS: IMBALANCE AND RESENTMENT

Programme regulations regarding the involvement of neighbouring partner countries create imbalances and resentment when it comes to the process of forming partnerships.

For many key actions, partner country beneficiaries have to prove their value to programme country beneficiaries in order to access projects. Focus group respondents from partner country beneficiaries found this very frustrating, especially in combination with other conditions that make collaboration with them burdensome for programme country beneficiaries. The most salient of these conditions are the limit on the overall budget that can be spent on cooperation projects and the often complex and time-consuming visa application process required for most cooperation projects.

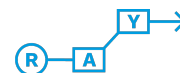
“In October there is a deadline where (some) NAs are done with the budget for projects with partner countries, so programme countries will not mention you in the grant because it is very clear that they will not get the grant then. Sometimes they do not say that they are done but you have lower chance to get the grant. If you have only one partner country then the project is already in disadvantage.” – Focus group participant⁶

Being dependent on the approval of programme country beneficiaries to join projects creates a power imbalance. This power imbalance is not only highly frustrating for beneficiaries from neighbouring partner countries, but it also makes it more difficult to engage newcomer beneficiaries outside of the programme countries, discourages networking and collaboration of partner country beneficiaries among themselves, limits diversity of collaborations between programme and partner countries and, in the context of the European Solidarity Corps, leaves neighbouring partner countries at a disadvantage when negotiating budget agreements. During the focus groups, discussions about the current programme regulations for partner countries triggered strong responses, especially from participants based in partner countries, but also from those based in programme countries.

“It really feels humiliating having to go and sell our programmes, chase programme country beneficiaries and convince them that we are good. And we are experienced, so I cannot imagine what it is like with newcomers” – Focus group participant

In addition to expressing strong reactions to being placed in a difficult position when it comes to applying for projects, participants from contact points in the focus groups also emphasised that the need to prove one's value to a programme beneficiary in order to be granted participation creates a significant barrier. This requirement can discourage newcomer beneficiaries from engaging with the programmes, as they find this dynamic daunting and intimidating to navigate.

⁶ Quotes from the focus group discussions throughout the report were extracted from written summaries of the interactions. This means that they may not exactly reproduce the original words of the speaker, even though this was the intention when producing the written summary.



Another important consequence of this regulation is that beneficiaries from partner countries, while they may have the opportunity to network with each other within the programmes, often cannot afford to take advantage of this chance. Instead, they are forced to concentrate on luring programme country beneficiaries in order to increase the likelihood of securing the grants. This means that a great deal of existing potential for building projects and social and civil society ties within the different partner regions is wasted. Building unity and collaboration around Europe should not exclude fostering ties between the neighbouring regions as well.

There is an additional consequence of the inability to apply directly, especially when taking into account the fact that beneficiaries struggle with bureaucracy within the programmes and tend to ease this burden by repeating familiar processes (see Section 8.2). It encourages neighbouring partner country beneficiaries to repeat collaborations with the one programme country beneficiary with whom they have successfully partnered before. In focus groups, respondents from programme and partner country beneficiaries shared that they tend to repeat partnerships that worked as opposed to seeking new potential partners for new projects. This is likely a way to reduce complexity in order to better manage the heavy bureaucratic load of projects. This limits diversity within the projects and creates situations where, for example, a neighbouring partner country beneficiary receives volunteers only from one programme country.

Lastly, as described in detail in Section 8.6, not being able to apply themselves leaves partner countries at a disadvantage when it comes to negotiating budgets within the European Solidarity Corps. Since they cannot act as the coordinating organisation, they do not have the authority to propose a budget themselves and must either accept or reject the budget proposed by programme country beneficiaries.

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

The findings suggest that partnerships between programme and partner countries are positive, cooperative, and mutually beneficial. Relationships are marked by trust, open communication, and minimal tension. These dynamics create a productive environment that fosters long-term collaboration, with participant beneficiaries showing a strong interest in continuing cooperation projects in the future.

However, these findings also highlight the challenges faced by partner country beneficiaries in the current programme structure. The inability to apply directly for grants creates a power imbalance that limits their autonomy and forces partner countries to prove their value to programme beneficiaries, resulting in frustration and diminished opportunities for networking among themselves. The structure discourages broader cooperation within the neighbouring regions and hampers the potential for more inclusive, balanced, and diverse partnerships across Europe. It also further complicates extending the programmes to newcomer beneficiaries in partner countries, who find the need to prove their value to programme country beneficiaries daunting.

7. THE ADDED VALUE OF COOPERATION PROJECTS

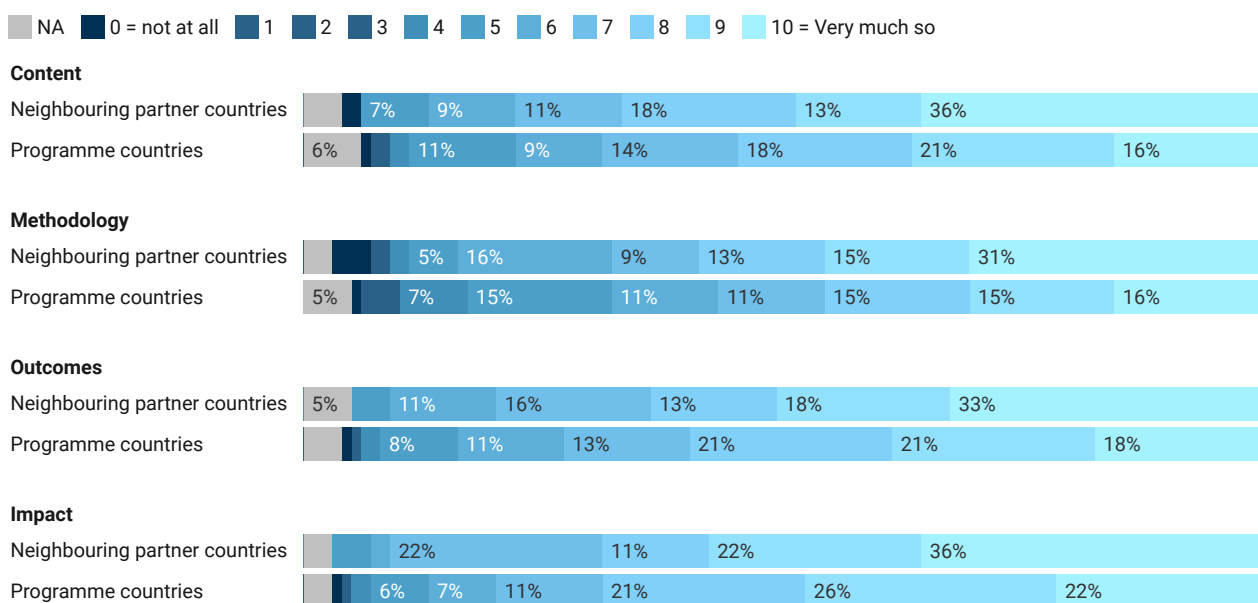
Organisational contact persons and project leaders agree that cooperation projects bring an added value and have different content, impact, outcomes and methodology than other projects.

Over 90% of thematic survey respondents from programme and partner countries agreed that including neighbouring partner countries and programme countries in a project brings an added value when compared to doing projects with different constellations of partners. When asked in more detail about how bringing programme and partner countries together influences a project (Figure 11), we see that respondents agreed it has a large impact on the content, methodology, outcomes, and impact of the project. Of the four dimensions, the methodology of a project seems to be the least affected, with the impact impact being affected the the most. However, most respondents judged one point similarly: all four of them were quite influenced by bringing programme and partner beneficiaries together.

When comparing respondents from programme and partner countries, the second gave less extreme assessments of how much these four components are influenced. This pattern may suggest that projects within the European youth programmes are more unique for partner country beneficiaries than cooperation projects are for programme country beneficiaries, who may compare them to other projects within the programmes.

Figure 11. Effects of cooperation between programme and partner countries

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons from programme and partner countries involved in cooperation projects within E+ and ESC. Nnpc=63; Npc=146. Q:How much has the involvement of neighbouring partner countries influenced the ... of the project?



11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10

Source: RAY NPC Thematic survey (2024)



Only a handful of survey respondents explained in detail the ways in which the constellation of programme and partner countries impacts the outcomes, content, impact, and methodology of projects. They explained that such collaboration brings added excitement for youth workers and young people. They also mentioned that it steers the content of projects (presumably towards Europe and European values, as discussed in Section 4). Cooperation between beneficiaries in programme and partner countries also provides new working contexts for youth workers, occasionally making collaboration slightly less smooth than in other kinds of projects.

Because the question of the added value of cooperation projects is a very relevant one for the parties involved, we also addressed this topic in the focus groups. The following subsections are what respondents from the focus groups, who had more space and time to elaborate their answers, added to the discussion.

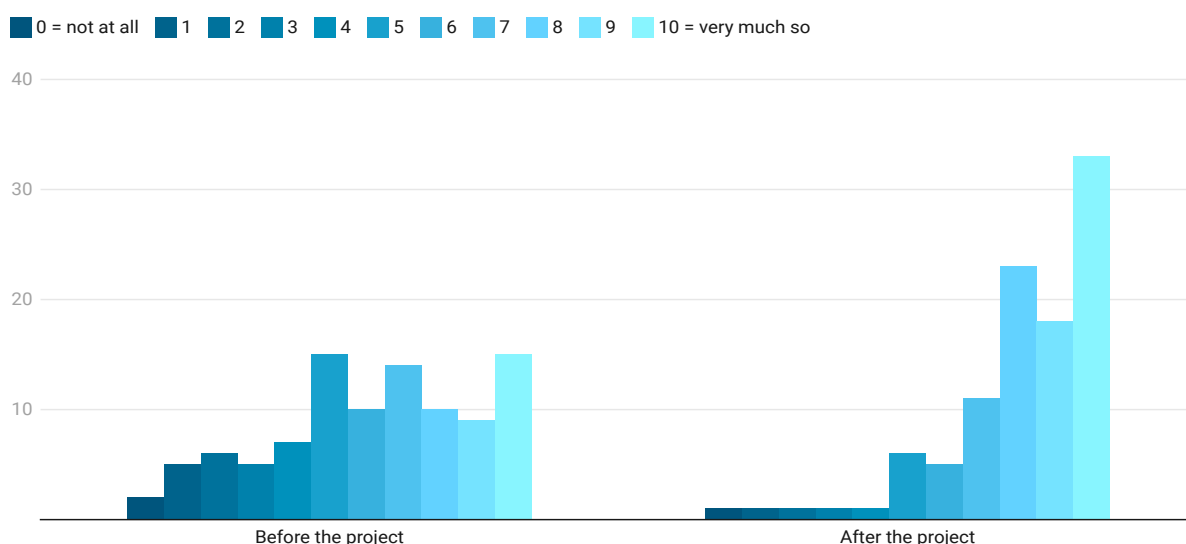
7.1. BRINGING EUROPE CLOSER

Cooperation projects dramatically increase participants’ feelings of closeness to Europe, foster pro-European attitudes in the communities involved, and result in a majority of project leaders developing a better understanding of Europe, the EU, and values related to social and human rights, participation, and active citizenship.

In the monitoring surveys, participants were asked to assess their closeness to Europe before and after their projects. Across both Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, participants from partner countries who rated their closeness to Europe before the project 4 or less on a scale from 0 to 10 increased their ratings by 4,6 points on average after the project. This means that virtually none of those who initially felt distant from Europe was left indifferent by their participation in the programmes.

Figure 12. Closeness to Europe before and after the project (European Solidarity Corps)

Responses from participants from neighbouring partner countries involved in individual and team volunteering within the European Solidarity Corps. Y axis shows percent of participants. N=360. Q:(Thinking back,) how close to Europe did you feel before the project / do you feel now?



11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10. Mean = 6 (before) and 8 (after). Median = 6 (before) and 9 (after).

Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

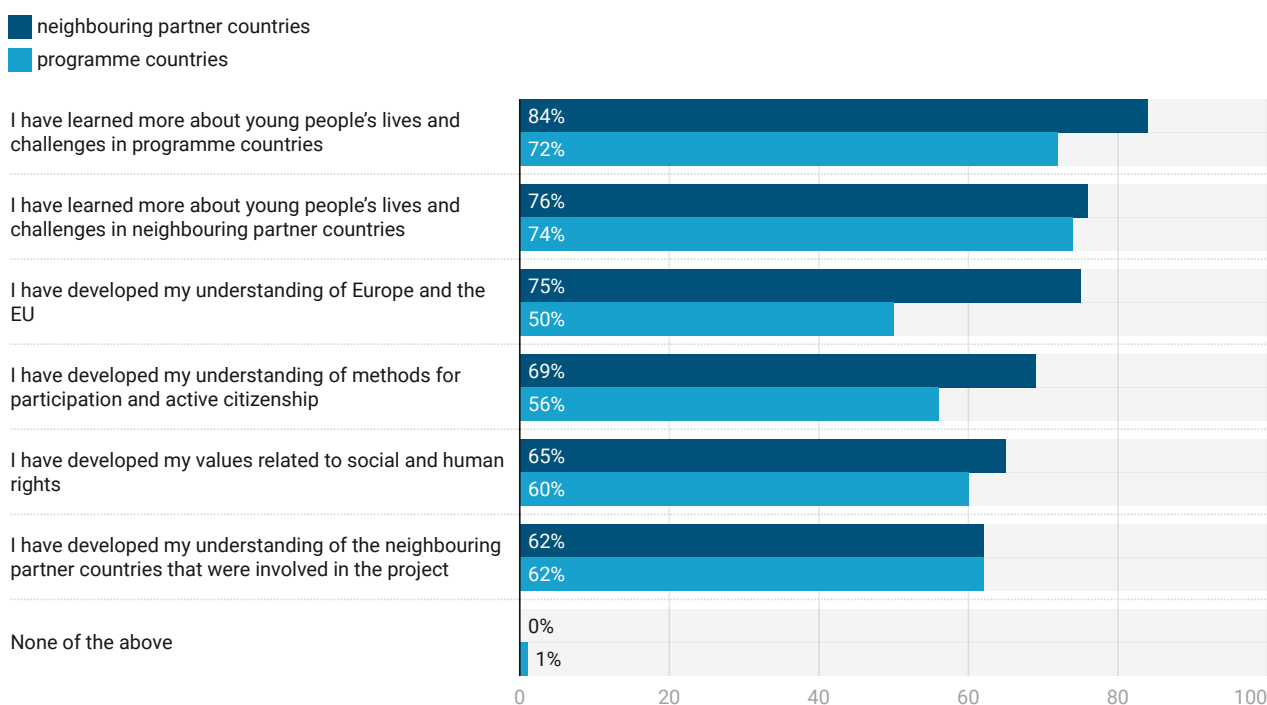
Figure 12 above shows the responses from participants from neighbouring partner countries in the European Solidarity Corps to the questions “How close did you feel to Europe before the project?” and “How close did you feel to Europe after the project?”. A similar pattern was observed among participants from neighbouring partner countries in Erasmus+ (please see annex D, Section 10.4 for the graph showing these responses).

However, developing the relationship to Europe and European values does not only happen at the level of project participants. In the thematic survey, about half of all respondent project leaders and organisational contact persons from programme countries and over 70% of those from partner countries indicated that they developed their understanding of Europe and the EU through their most recent project. Respondents also indicated that their last project made it possible for them to develop their values related to social and human rights (PC: 60%, NPC: 65%) and their understanding of methods for participation and active citizenship (PC: 56%, NPC: 69%) (rows 4 through 6 of Figure 13 below).

Discussions in the focus groups also reflected these findings. Participants observed that contact with the programmes as a participant or part of the local community resulted in a spread of pro-European attitudes, with the change being particularly in more rural, more Eurosceptic contexts.

Figure 13. Project outcomes

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons to the thematic survey. Nnpc=63; Npc=146. Q:As a result of the project...



Multiple choice question, none of the above exclusive
 Source: RAY NPC thematic survey (2024)



7.2. BUILDING MEANINGFUL BRIDGES

Cooperation projects foster mutual understanding and build meaningful cross-cultural ties among participants and beneficiaries.

Focus groups respondents emphasised that when young people participate in mobilities or volunteering projects, they open their minds and break stereotypes. For example, these experiences can dismantle preconceptions about what it means to live in a specific place that they had originally judged as not being comfortable or safe. Participants build friendships and develop lasting connections with one other and each other's countries, extending beyond the immediate duration of the exchange.

A networking and bonding effect also occurs at the level of beneficiaries, project leaders, and organisational contact persons. An overwhelming majority of thematic survey respondents from neighbouring partner countries (92%) as well as from programme countries (87%) agreed that their organisation meaningfully extended its networks across programme country borders. As illustrated in rows 1 through 3 of [Figure 13](#) above, the bonding and networking took place not only at the structural level. Respondents indicated that, as a result of their last project, they themselves learnt about the countries involved in the project and about the lives and challenges of young people in those countries.

Further evidence of the ties created beyond programme borders is a testimonial from a Ukrainian focus group participant about how their organisation's partners in programme countries started accepting Ukrainians without any agreement as a response to the Russian invasion. This is a poignant example of how connections between people and organisations created through interaction within the programmes turn into social bonds between individuals and civil societies that work to foster a sense of community and solidarity across region borders. It is an example of the social value of the programmes beyond their immediate activities.

“When the Russian invasion started, partners in programme countries started to accept Ukrainians without any agreement and there was a point where, if people had to flee, I knew that I could give them some contacts maybe to save some lives” – Focus group participant⁷

⁷ Quotes from the focus group discussions throughout the report were extracted from written summaries of the interactions. This means that they may not exactly reproduce the original words of the speaker, even though this was the intention when producing the written summary.

7.3. SUPPORTING YOUTH POLICY AND THE YOUTH FIELD

Being involved with the European youth programmes provides beneficiaries in partner countries with guidance, recognition, and essential advocacy tools.

“The ministry sees that you are an actor in the field and you have good partners. If we ask for a meeting, they are more open and more ready” – Focus group participant

Focus group respondents from partner countries underlined as added value the effect that being part of the programmes has had on their organisation’s recognition. Further, in several cases their involvement in the programmes has also bolstered their efforts to advance youth strategies and policies within their countries. Being heavily involved in the European youth programmes can serve as a valuable credential, enhancing an organisation’s trustworthiness and influence within its political context.

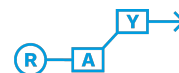
“The programmes are very significant in recognizing youth work. Before no one knew what youth work is, now they know. People now know what we are trying to do when it comes to promoting youth work and youth policy.” – Focus group participant

Additionally, the programmes set standards, train youth workers, spread good practices, and facilitate organisational learning, thus promoting the development of the youth field and supporting the creation of youth strategies in countries where the youth sector is very small or not recognised. Specifically, respondents from Armenia, Albania, Georgia and Montenegro touched upon this issue. Respondents valued the fact that this push for the field happens at grassroots level and brings together stakeholders from different regions. One of the respondents, from Montenegro, specifically remembered the progress and development of their own organisation towards better youth work in the last 10 years as a result of being part of the programmes. However, a respondent from Kosovo pointed out that the European youth programmes do not cover the need for national, dedicated, formal, quality youth work education.

“Youth work is not a profession, not recognized in the legal system. The only source for development of competences, etc. is through the experience of programme countries. Meeting with different stakeholders from different regions to exchange knowledge and expertise really helps. It brings experiences and knowledge to the grassroots level.” – Focus group participant

This phenomenon is also reflected in the thematic survey. According to the RAY Network’s study on organisational learning and development of beneficiaries within the European youth programmes (RAY LEARN⁸), networking is a core pillar of organisational learning and development of beneficiaries. Organisational problem-solving skills and best practices are more effectively acquired and adapted to withstand organisational changes when developed through collaboration with other organisations in similar contexts, rather than training and capacity building of individuals.

⁸ <https://www.researchyouth.net/projects/learn/>



As a consequence, providing a space and platform for interorganisational networking is a primary way in which the European youth programmes foster organisational learning and development. Responses to the thematic survey reveal that cooperation projects extend this space for networking towards building relationships between programme and partner countries: 92% of partner country respondents and 87% of programme country respondents agreed that their organisation extended their networks meaningfully towards each other as a result of their last project.

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

These findings demonstrate that having a constellation of programme and partner countries in a project brings with it an added value. Cooperation partnerships have different content, impact, methodologies, and outcomes than other partnerships according to the people implementing them. Participation in the programmes typically strengthens participants' and youth workers' ties to Europe and to one another, making them an ideal tool to foster social connections between programme and partner countries and to spread a sense of closeness to Europe beyond programme borders. Moreover, cooperation between programme and partner countries extends the impact of the programmes as a driving force for youth field development beyond programme borders. The programmes offer effective support for beneficiaries who are shaping their national youth field by inspiring the creation of youth strategy or youth policy, spreading best practices, and providing capacity building.

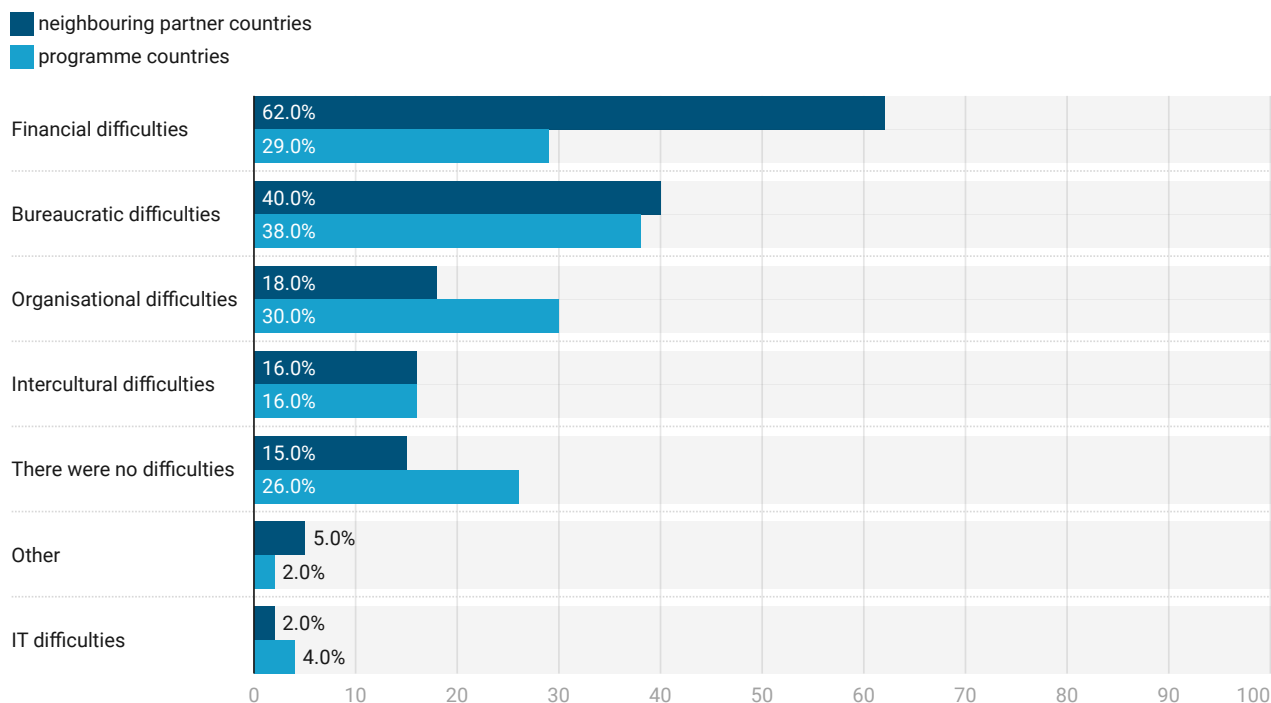
8. NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

The last Section of the thematic survey and the focus groups dealt with needs and challenges of stakeholders within cooperation projects. This is where we gathered feedback from beneficiaries, project leaders, and organisational contact persons. A majority (87%) of thematic survey respondents shared that they experienced difficulties during the implementation of their last project.

As shown in [Figure 14](#), programme and partner country beneficiaries struggled in different ways. For partner country beneficiaries, financial difficulties (discussed in detail in Section 8.1) were clearly one of the most common struggles. On the other hand, bureaucratic difficulties posed a key challenge to programme country beneficiaries, most likely related to project applications (discussed in detail in Section 8.2); and visa applications (discussed in detail in Section 8.3), as is hinted at by the pattern of responses in [Figure 15](#). Furthermore, programme country beneficiaries more frequently reported having found no difficulties ([Figure 14](#)). Intercultural differences were relatively seldom problematic, and IT difficulties played an even more minor role.

Figure 14. Main difficulties in cooperation projects

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons to the thematic survey. Nnpc=63; Npc=146. Q:What were the main difficulties you ran into when implementing this specific project?

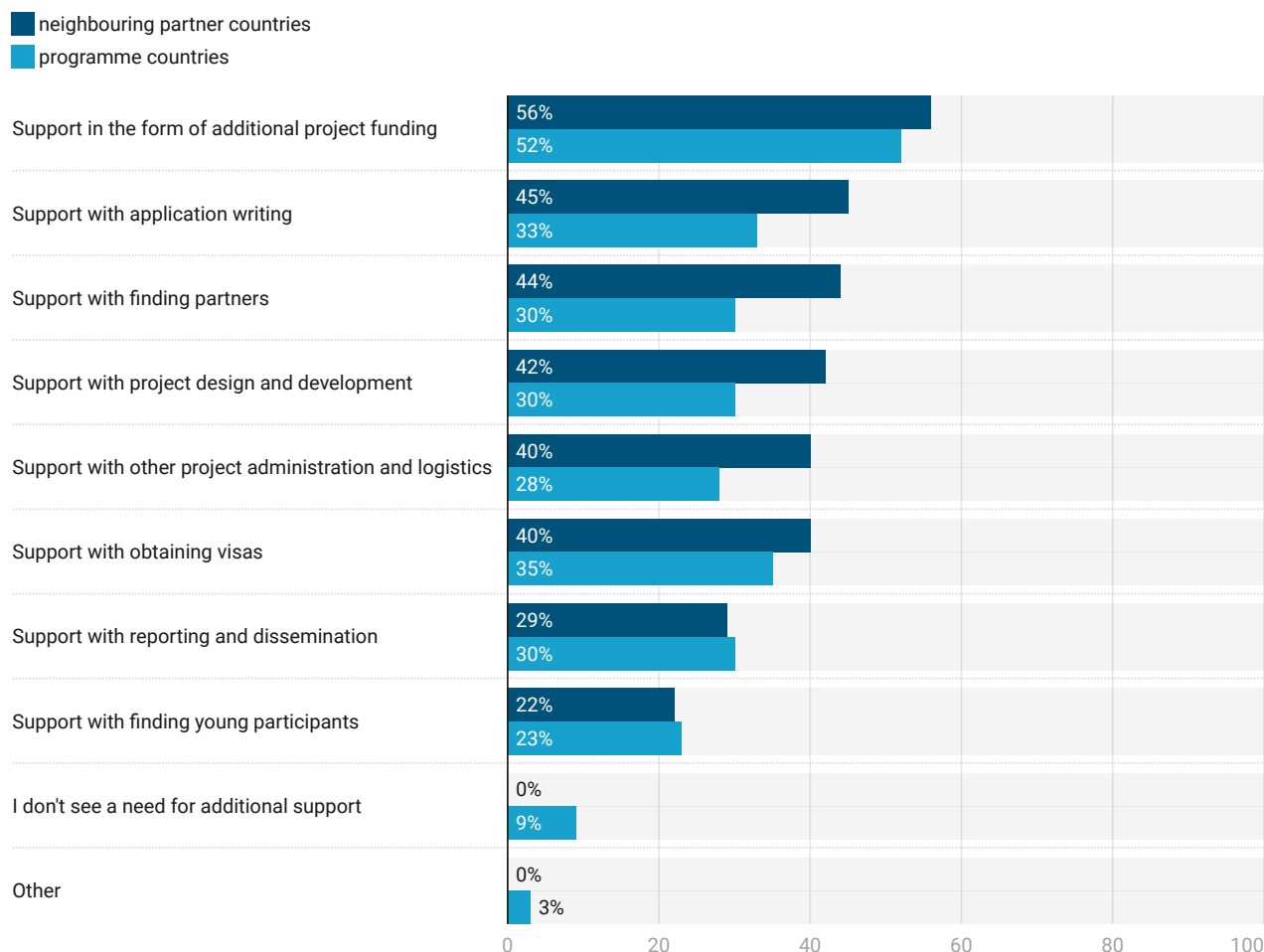


Multiple choice question, there were no difficulties exclusive

Source: RAY NPC thematic survey (2024)

Figure 15. Beneficiaries' needs for support in the future

Responses of project leaders and organisational contact persons from programme and partner countries involved in cooperation projects within E+ and ESC. Nnpc=63; Nc=146. Q: What support from the side of the Programmes would you love to see for projects involving programme and neighbouring partner countries?



Multiple choice question, I don't see a need for support exclusive
 Source: RAY NPC thematic survey (2024)

In addition to the feedback from beneficiaries, project leaders, and organisational contact persons, we also gathered feedback from young participants. We did this through an open response field in the monitoring survey, which asked them what, if anything, they would improve about the project they just took part in. For this report, we focused our analysis on the responses from participants based in neighbouring partner countries.

The following sections integrate the responses from the two surveys with those from participants in the focus groups and explore in detail the main challenges, needs, and opportunities for improvement according to this input.

8.1. INSUFFICIENT FUNDING

Project and programme beneficiaries find it extremely difficult to fulfil all project obligations and tasks with the budget provided. Project participants would like better accommodations, food, project allowances, and travel reimbursement.

As shown in [Figure 14](#), financial difficulties are one of the most common hurdles and the most prevalent overall for beneficiaries from partner countries, 62% of whom reported having faced this kind of struggle. Focus group participants corroborated these findings, in agreement across the board that the project budgets are too low to afford proper lodgings, travel, and activities. The situation is exacerbated when project leaders have no access to budget airlines and have to manage with more expensive local airlines that operate only in the summer season. In many national contexts, including in programme countries, the lump sums are simply not enough to cover food and accommodation.

“It takes us a lot of months just to find a place where we can do the activities” – Focus group participant⁹

The situation is worse for partner country beneficiaries because allowances are often less for these regions, while the cost of living is not necessarily lower than in programme regions. This may explain why more beneficiaries from partner countries reported financial difficulties. In any case, focus group participants from programme and partner regions view this difference as unfair.

Focus group participants from contact points also explained that, on top of having to prove their value to programme country beneficiaries (see [Section 6.2](#)), insufficient budgets for project ambitions is another main factor deterring new beneficiaries from daring to try the programmes. Potential new beneficiaries in rural areas in particular are not convinced that they can provide a group of young people with suitable living conditions and worthwhile activities on such a small budget.

A further perspective on this issue is derived from the feedback that young participants provided in the monitoring survey when asked what could be improved. For both programmes, participants expressed the desire for better standards in housing conditions and the presence of basic amenities, in some cases indicating the need for more stringent controls to ensure that quality housing and basic comfort is provided. Respondents from Erasmus+, in particular, also voiced a need for improved food quality and dietary options. Respondents from the European Solidarity Corps explicitly echoed focus group respondents in asking for more pocket money to match living standards. Those in Erasmus+ also complained that the travel allowance is simply not enough given the current flight prices and made the request to adjust it to each

⁹ Quotes from the focus group discussions throughout the report were extracted from written summaries of the interactions. This means that they may not reproduce the original words of the speaker exactly, even though this was the intention when producing the written summary.



region's ease of travel. In general, it is important to note that 31% of improvement suggestions from monitoring survey respondents in Erasmus+ and 25% from those in the European Solidarity Corps were related to financial support, making it the most prevalent and second most prevalent theme in their feedback, respectively. In the feedback related to the European Solidarity Corps, the request for more financial support was only surpassed by a desire for more organisational oversight and quality control (in 31% of responses), as discussed in Section 8.5.

“Pocket money has to be raised absolutely. It is not enough to survive” – Monitoring survey respondent

One further complaint from young people which was also present on the part of focus group participants was the delay in receiving project funding. For beneficiaries, this delay means that they have to use their own financial resources to be able to carry out the project. For young participants it means that they sometimes do not receive their travel reimbursement until many months after the activity – almost a year, some respondents report. As a result, some respondents suggest that their travel should be paid for directly as opposed to it being reimbursed.

“The time for the reimbursement was too long, it took nearly a year to receive our refund” – Monitoring survey respondent

8.2. BUREAUCRATIC AND ORGANISATIONAL DIFFICULTIES

Beneficiaries in programme and partner countries struggle with writing applications and with designing and managing projects that match programme requirements.

Bureaucratic difficulties are the next most prevalent type of struggle within cooperation projects as seen in Figure 14. A large component of these difficulties, and one that is common to beneficiaries from both programme and partner countries, is obtaining visas for all participants on time. This challenge is dealt with in the next Section (section 8.3).

The next biggest bureaucratic hurdle, particularly common for partner countries, is applying for projects (see Figure 15). This finding is somewhat unexpected, as only programme country beneficiaries are permitted to officially submit applications for most action types, with the exception of Capacity Building for Youth. Nevertheless, a sizeable percentage of partner country respondents would like support with application writing.

The fact that so many partner country beneficiaries—most of whom lack experience with Capacity Building for Youth projects—reported needing help with application writing may indicate that they are striving (and struggling) to understand the programmes' design, management, and funding logic. If they understood these better, they could more effectively contribute to project design (and therefore application writing) by specifying their tasks and responsibilities within a partnership.

Further evidence for this explanation comes from the large share of respondents based in partner countries requesting support with “project design and development” (42%) and

“project administration and logistics” (40%) (Figure 15). A smaller, but still notable, percentage of beneficiaries from programme countries reported needing help with these issues (28% and 30% respectively).

One way in which beneficiaries and youth workers within them become more comfortable with bureaucracy and project management is through experience. In general, thematic survey respondents shared that the more experience a beneficiary can build with the programmes, the easier participation becomes for them¹⁰. A similar dynamic may apply at the project format level. This could in part explain the response pattern of programme country respondents when it comes to their organisation’s willingness to engage in more projects with neighbouring partner countries (Figure 8, Section 6.1). There appears to be a strong willingness to collaborate with neighbouring partner countries again following at least one collaboration. At the same time, less respondents from programme countries indicated that their organisation is ready to try out *new project formats* with neighbouring partner country beneficiaries. This could be due to the complexity of the associated yet unknown administrative burden. If this is accurate, it means that there is not only a bureaucratic barrier to entering the European youth programmes, but also to exploring all cooperation possibilities within them.

8.3. OBTAINING VISAS AND ARRANGING LEGAL, SAFE TRAVEL

Project and programme beneficiaries struggle with getting visas approved on time and ensuring that participants from areas of political conflict can travel safely.

Assistance with obtaining visas is the most frequently reported bureaucracy-related need among programme country beneficiaries, as shown in Figure 15 and corroborated by focus group participants. Focus group participants from programme countries shared that rejected or delayed visas lead to serious problems with project management and create discriminatory situations. For instance, participants with citizenship in their country of residence are often selected over those without, simply because arranging visas for them is much easier. More broadly, arranging travel for minorities and for young people from areas of political conflict presents significant challenges. For example, young people with Palestinian citizenship face considerable difficulty traveling to Egypt; and young people with Syrian citizenship cannot travel to Lebanon without risk of being returned to Syria, even if they have acquired the citizenship of the country where they currently reside.

While inherent to the current geopolitical situation, these impediments place a substantial additional strain on project organisers, one that is not always foreseen or straightforward to tackle.

“Those with [the host country’s] citizenship have an easier time getting visas and they are favoured to make the project easier when we do not have resources to deal with the visa problems” – Focus group participant

¹⁰ Answers of open field question



8.4. NAVIGATING INTERCULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Programme beneficiaries often run into unforeseen country-specific situations and regulations when collaborating with partner countries and would appreciate understanding and guidance.

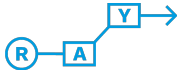
Focus group participants described various difficult situations that they had encountered in their cooperation projects and related to specific conditions in partner countries not being taken into account when designing the programmes. For instance, one participant noted that partnerships with Egyptian organisations require that these organisations create a non-formal group solely for the project, as most Egyptian organisations are affiliated with companies, and programme guidelines prohibit partnerships with companies. The respondent's organisation was unaware of this requirement early on, resulting in significantly more effort for carrying out the project than originally expected. A situation like this can put enormous pressure on beneficiaries, many of whom have to deploy their human resources at full capacity to engage in projects.

In another case, a participant shared that they faced disproportionate difficulty in obtaining all the invoices required to secure project funding when collaborating with beneficiaries in Egypt and Lebanon. They explained that they were met with overall unwillingness to sign invoices and that the beneficiary was not ready for this. Furthermore, the programmes do not accommodate or account for situations like this one.

“When writing the project application there is no problem, but when implementing project outside of Europe, then there are problems” – Focus group participant

While respondents understood that these differences are normal and adapting to them makes for intercultural learning, they proposed that there could be some acknowledgement, adaptation, and also guidance from the programmes' side on specific project-relevant situations or features of specific regions or populations. Indeed, participants' requests for guidance are not only related to practicalities such as the ones described in the examples above, but also to socio-political sensitivities one may encounter during a project. For example, one participant wished that project leaders and organisational contact persons had been made more aware of the tensions that may arise if they bring together people of Russian and Ukrainian heritage during this time, regardless of the nationalities they now possess. This is particularly important when there is a power imbalance; for example, where some individuals involved are leaders or trainers and the others are participants.

The idea of providing guidance emerged in the focus groups in the context of understanding and adapting to the conditions in neighbouring partner countries, specifically because these conditions were perceived as inherently unexpected for youth workers from programme countries. However, it could—and probably should be—extended to any country or region or people that participates in the programmes, including programme countries, their regions, and their people. While it is unlikely that the programmes can provide official guidelines on “what to watch out for” in each case, these discussions point to the need for beneficiaries to better



understand the contexts they will be working in when joining a project. This could be incorporated into the programmes by encouraging them to network with others within the programmes who have done projects in or with a specific country, region, or people as preparation for a partnership in the same context.

8.5. VETTING OF BENEFICIARIES AND PARTICIPANTS IN ESC

Young participants of the European Solidarity Corps would like better monitoring of hosts and clear grievance procedures. Beneficiaries would like enhanced protections for organisations when the behaviour of volunteers becomes harmful.

The most prominent feedback by far from young participants as to what they would improve in cooperation projects within the European Solidarity Corps is related to organisational oversight and quality control. 31% of respondents who gave feedback mentioned this point in their input. Specifically, respondents reported that they would like better screening and monitoring of organisations, a system to ensure that host organisations are respectful to volunteers, and improved quality control to ensure that project and tasks description matches the actual project and tasks. Most importantly, they would like to have regular check-ins during placements, providing a contact point in the case of unresolved problems with the host organisation. Additionally, 11% of participant feedback focused on monitoring and improving living standards for volunteers, with requests for private rooms for long-term volunteers and more comfortable accommodations overall.

“Communication with somebody outside the organization where the project takes place would be beneficial” – Monitoring survey respondent

On the other hand, according to focus group respondents, beneficiaries also feel a significant lack of protection. In situations where they perceive that the behaviour of volunteers becomes destructive to their interests, property, or facilities, they feel isolated in addressing the problems and bearing the financial burden on their own. The hosting beneficiaries perceive that all efforts to keep the volunteering relationship fair are focused on the volunteers while the hosts are left with no support in the event that the volunteering relationship turns harmful for them.

“A need would be having specific rules to protect the sending and hosting organizations, not only protecting the volunteers” – Focus group participant

In general, and based on discussions in this Section and the next (section 8.6), it appears that stakeholders in the European Solidarity Corps would like enhanced monitoring of the actors involved, clearer guidance on their rights and responsibilities, improved support for communication, and a stronger accountability system.



8.6. BUDGET DIVISION GUIDANCE IN ESC

Beneficiaries would like official guidance on the division of budgets and roles in the European Solidarity Corps, especially in the current context where partner country beneficiaries cannot be the coordinating organisation.

Participants in the focus groups discussed that misunderstandings and unfair situations related to budget division in the European Solidarity Corps are one frequent challenge. They mentioned occasional communication problems that arise with regards to each party's understanding of the contract.

They also described that the coordinating organisation's authority to make decisions on the budget division grants them a power that is sometimes abused. The situation is exacerbated in the case of cooperation projects where beneficiaries from partner countries can only accept or reject the deal proposed to them, as they cannot apply themselves.

As discussed in Section 6.2, partner country beneficiaries find it difficult and frustrating to work on engaging new programme country beneficiaries to be able to participate in the programme, often leading them to accept unfavourable agreements. In general, respondents agreed that sending organisations are often at a disadvantage in these situations because sending costs are set too low or not paid, with the argument that hosting organisations have a lot of expenses and a limited budget.

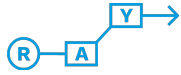
One respondent compared the setting up of volunteering projects to that of key action two projects in Erasmus+. They proposed that the budget division in volunteering projects was more like that of key action two in Erasmus+, i.e., more specific and top-down.

"I coordinate Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and they are totally different even though there are guidelines for both. It's more specific in KA2. We know the budget, when we report financially, we know who does what" – Focus group participant

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

These findings illustrate that the main challenges and needs for support in cooperation projects relate to insufficient funding. This challenge becomes apparent in all instances of data collection included in this report. Respondents of the thematic survey and the focus groups agree that project lump sums, travel allowances, and daily allowances are very often insufficient to cover reasonable expenses. Project participants share the consequences of this problem in the monitoring surveys: one of the most common themes in their feedback is the need to ensure basic comfort when it comes to lodging and catering, in addition to the need to ensure that daily and travel allowances correspond to the costs of living and travelling in the destination regions.

Other relevant challenges are related to application writing, obtaining visas, intercultural adaptations, and the need for clear budget division guidelines. Further, there is a desire for improved monitoring of participants and beneficiaries in the European Solidarity Corps. This



issue was the most commonly reported theme in European Solidarity Corps participant feedback, with some noting that certain host organisations did not adhere to the project contracts. Participants also expressed the need for a contact person outside the hosting organisation to resolve potential conflicts. Beneficiaries, on the other hand, would like more support in handling situations where volunteers' behaviour becomes destructive to the organisation or its interests.

S

9. METHODS

The findings in this report integrate data from three different sources: the RAY monitoring surveys for the analysis of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, a thematic survey designed specifically to address the key objectives of RAY NPC, and notes from three focus groups with representatives of beneficiaries from programme and partner countries involved in cooperation projects.

9.1. THE MONITORING SURVEYS

Project participants and project leaders within Erasmus+ (youth exchanges, youth participation projects, youth worker mobilities and training and cooperation activities) and the European Solidarity Corps (volunteering projects and solidarity projects) were invited via email to take the RAY Network's multilingual online survey upon the conclusion of their project. Upon entering the survey, participant metadata collected during registration (such as their country of residence, the type of project they participated in, the topics of this project, whether the project was a cooperation project or not, etc.) was linked to survey responses. The monitoring surveys were conducted between June and December 2023, covering project participants and team members of projects funded through the current programme generation and completed in 2021, 2022, or 2023. The surveys were available in 27 languages and enquired about the respondent's experience in their last project. The surveys assessed the respondent's experience and the project's impact along the four thematic priorities of the European youth programmes (Inclusion, Participation, Sustainability and Digitalisation), and also gathered select demographic data. Please refer to [Table 2](#) and [Table 1](#) for an overview of sample sizes for respondents in cooperation projects and those in other projects.

Table 1. Monitoring survey sample: European Solidarity Corps

Overview of sample sizes of the RAY Monitoring survey related to the European Solidarity Corps. Information is based on respondents' metadata obtained when they signed up for their projects.

Total participants in volunteering projects	2621
Participants from NPC	360
Participants from PC	2261
Participants in cooperation projects	466
Participants in other projects	2155

Classifications are based on respondents' attributes related to sending country, hosting country, and country of residence.

Source: RAY Monitoring Survey (2024)

Table 2. Monitoring survey sample: Erasmus +

Overview of sample sizes of the RAY Monitoring survey related to Erasmus +. Information is based on respondents' metadata obtained when they signed up for their projects.

Total participants in mobilities of young people	7567
Participants from NPC	588
Participants from PC	6979
Participants in cooperation projects	1812
<i>of these, participants in YE</i>	<i>1812</i>
Participants in other projects	5755
<i>of these, participants in YE</i>	<i>4707</i>
Total participants in mobilities of youth workers	4435
Participants in cooperation projects	1643
Participants in other projects	2792
Total project leaders in YE and YWM	3628
Project leaders in cooperation YE	818
Project leaders in other YE	1841
Project leaders in cooperation YWM	363
Project leaders in other YWM	606

Classifications are based on attributes related to project type and country of residence. YE = youth exchanges; YWM = youth worker mobilities
 Source: RAY Monitoring Survey (2024)

Some of the data from the monitoring survey used in this report (those in Section 8.1 and Section 8.5) came from open-answer fields in the survey. Due to the large number of responses and the fact that they were written in different languages, this data was analysed with the assistance of artificial intelligence. Specifically, Anthropic's large language model (LLM) Claude 3.5 Sonnet¹¹ was used. This technology helped translate responses, identify patterns, generate summaries, and enhance the interpretability of the results. Some reproductions of participants' responses in this report have been slightly modified to correct grammatical mistakes without changing the original wording by the participants.

9.2. THE THEMATIC SURVEY

The thematic survey was designed to address the key objectives of RAY NPC. It was aimed at organisational contact persons and project teams of cooperation projects. The link to the survey was shared with the public via the RAY Network's website and advertised by the RAY Network's partners and RAY NPC project partners from the Long-term Strategic Activity on Neighbouring Partner Countries (LTSA NPC) and the regional SALTO Resource Centres.

¹¹ Anthropic. (2024). Claude 3.5 Sonnet [Large Language Model]. <https://www.anthropic.com>



The RAY Network also sent direct invitations to project team members involved in mobilities, youth participation projects, key action two projects and volunteering projects. The survey was available in English and open to respondents from 15 November 2023 to 06 February 2024. Respondents were prompted to answer questions by recalling their last cooperation project (which 76% of them assessed as “typical”). Survey questions assessed the effects of cooperation projects on beneficiaries, how cooperation projects are perceived as different from other projects, the partnership dynamics, the overall satisfaction with cooperation projects, and needs and challenges of beneficiaries in cooperation projects. Refer to [Table 3](#) for an overview of sample size and profiles of respondents.

Some of the data from the thematic survey used in this report comes from open-answer fields in the survey, specifically those in Section 7. This data was analysed without the help of artificial intelligence. Some reproductions of participants’ responses in this report have been slightly modified to correct grammatical mistakes without changing the original wording by the participants.

Table 3. Thematic survey sample

Overview of sample sizes of the RAY NPC Thematic survey. Information is based on respondents' answers to the survey.

Total project leaders and organisational contact persons	209	
Respondents from programme countries	146	70%
Respondents from neighbourhood east	42	20%
Respondents from other regions	21	10%
Respondents with experience in youth exchanges	156	75%
Respondents with experience in mobility of youth workers	98	47%
Respondents with experience in youth participation projects	62	30%
Respondents with experience in international volunteering projects	52	25%
Respondents who consider last experience typical	158	76%

Classifications are based on respondents' answers to the survey.

Source: RAY NPC Thematic survey (2024)

9.3. THE FOCUS GROUPS

Three semi-structured, online focus groups with organisational contact persons and project coordinators specifically designed to address the key objectives of RAY NPC were conducted in June and July 2024.

Each focus group was originally conceived to address the same topics around a different action type. One focus group was designed to revolve around key action one, another one around key action two and capacity building for youth, and the third one around volunteering projects. However, the participants of the focus groups often had experience with more than one action type and also provided answers that referred to their experience with action types beyond the theme of the specific focus group.

Questions within the focus groups explored participants' perception of the added value of bringing beneficiaries in programme and partner countries together, their views on restrictions to partner country applications, their thoughts on changes in programme conditions over time, and their experiences of needs and challenges within cooperation projects.

Quotes from the focus group discussions throughout the report were extracted from written summaries of the interactions. This means that they may not reproduce the original words of the speaker exactly, even though this was the intention when producing the written summary. Focus group participants were recruited by RAY NPC project partners from the Long-term Strategic Activity on Neighbouring Partner Countries (LTSA NPC) and the regional SALTO Resource Centres via email invitation. They were prompted to sign up to a participant pool and then assigned to one of the three focus groups.

Participants were assigned to focus groups based on their experience with the specific project types of the focus group and with the goal of creating a balanced final sample with a similar number of participants from programme and partner countries and representation from as many individual countries as possible. Refer to [Table 4](#) and [Table 5](#) on the following pages for information on the participants' background and region for each focus group.

Table 4. Focus group sample

Participants' distribution in focus groups. Participants were assigned to focus groups based on their experience with the specific project types of the focus group and with the goal of creating a balanced final sample with a similar number of participants from programme and partner countries and representation from as many regions and individual countries as possible.

Group one (key action one)

Georgia

Ukraine

Montenegro

Slovenia

Finland

Group two (volunteering)

Belarus

Albania

Egypt

Azerbaijan

Group three (key action three and capacity building for youth)

Kosovo

Armenia

Albania

Slovenia

Table 5. Regional representation in focus groups

Regions represented within the focus groups. Participants were assigned to focus groups based on their experience with the specific project types of the focus group and with the goal of creating a balanced final sample with a similar number of participants from programme and partner countries and representation from as many regions and individual countries as possible. Some countries in this list were represented by more than one participant.

Western Balkans

Montenegro

Albania

Kosovo

Neighborhood East

Georgia

Ukraine

Belarus

Azerbaijan

Armenia

South-Mediterranean countries

Egypt

Programme countries

Finland

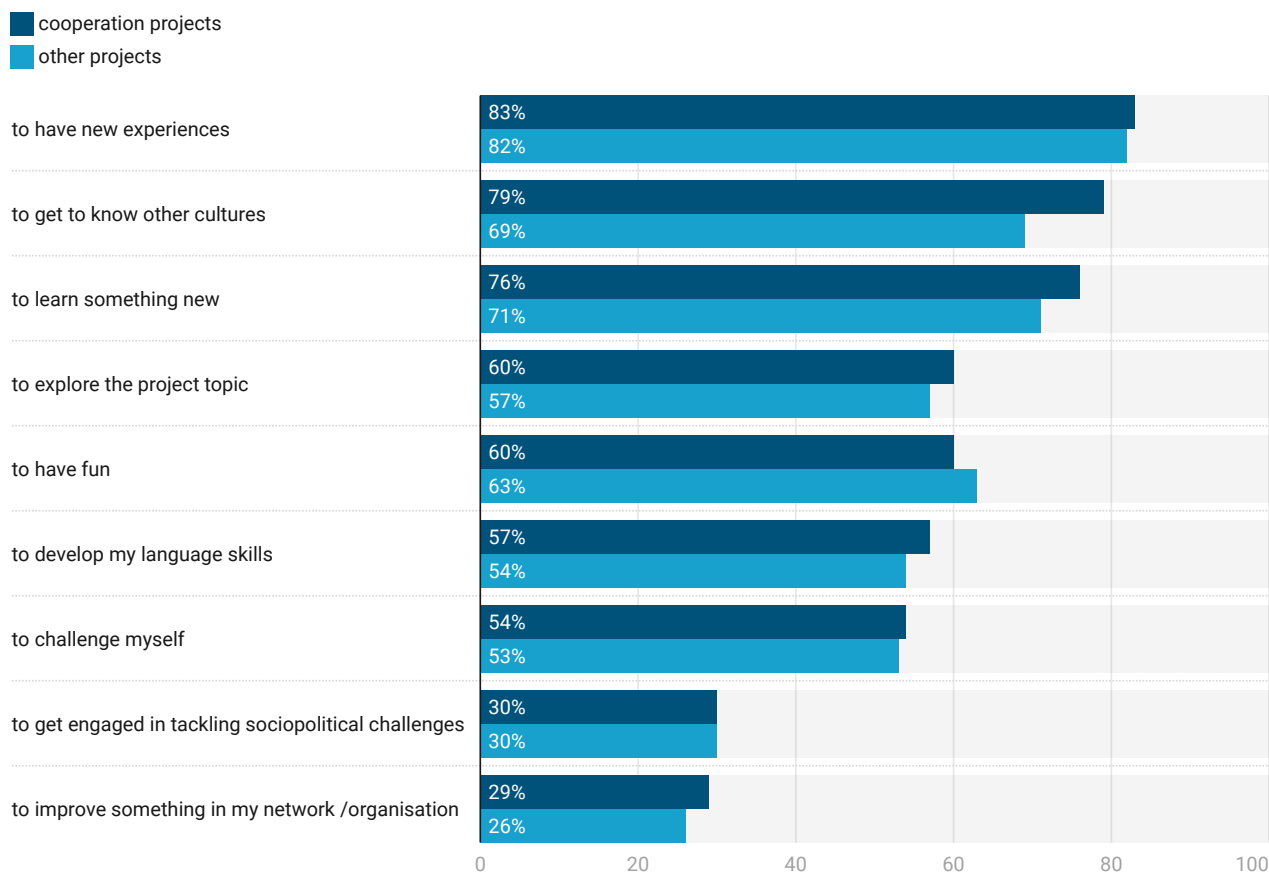
Slovenia

10. ANNEX

10.1. ANNEX A: PARTICIPANTS' MOTIVATIONS TO JOIN

Figure 16. Participants' motivations to join Erasmus+

Responses of project participants in cooperation projects (youth exchanges) and other projects (youth dialogue projects, youth exchanges and youth participation mobilities). Ncoop=1812; Nother=5755. Q:My reasons for participating in this project were...



Multiple choice question

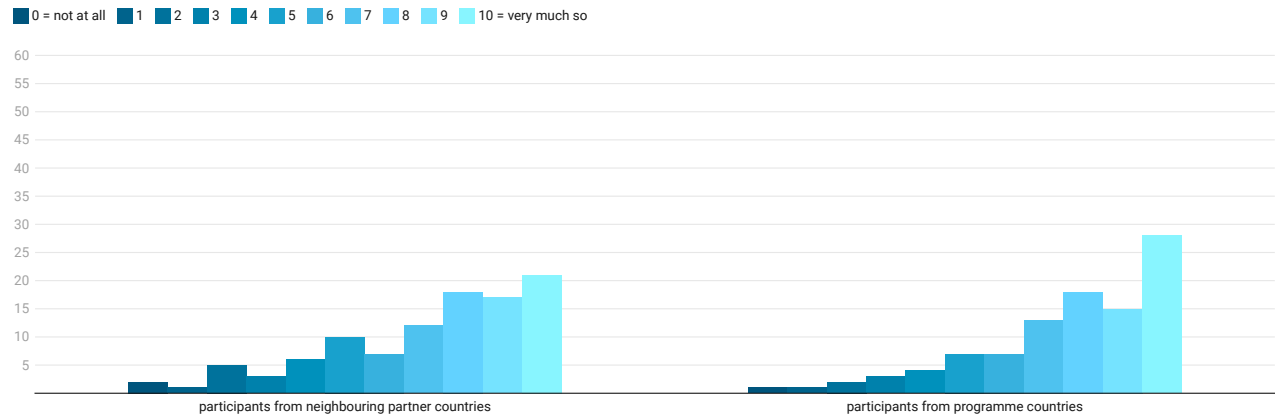
Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Go back to Section [2.2](#)

10.2. ANNEX B: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Figure 17. Affordability of European Solidarity Corps projects for participants

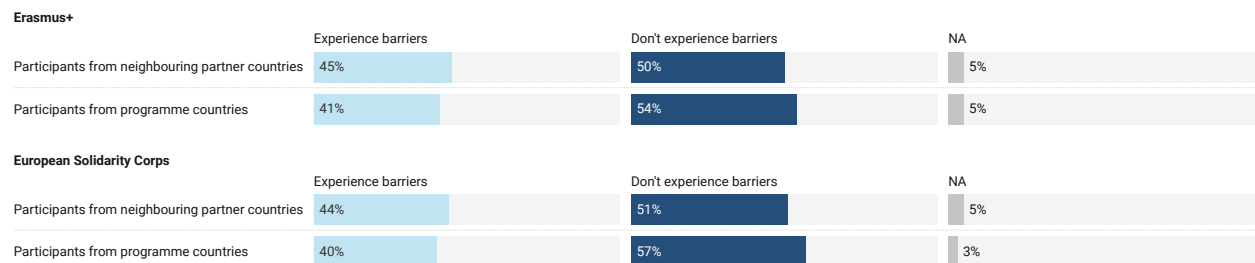
Responses from participants in individual and team volunteering projects. Y axis shows percent of participants. Nnpc=360; Npc=2261. Q: How easy was it for you to afford participating in the project?



11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10. Mean = 7,1 (NPC pax) and 7,5 (PC pax). Median = 8 (NPC pax) and 8 (PC pax). Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Figure 18. Participants' experience of barriers to reach full potential outside of the programmes

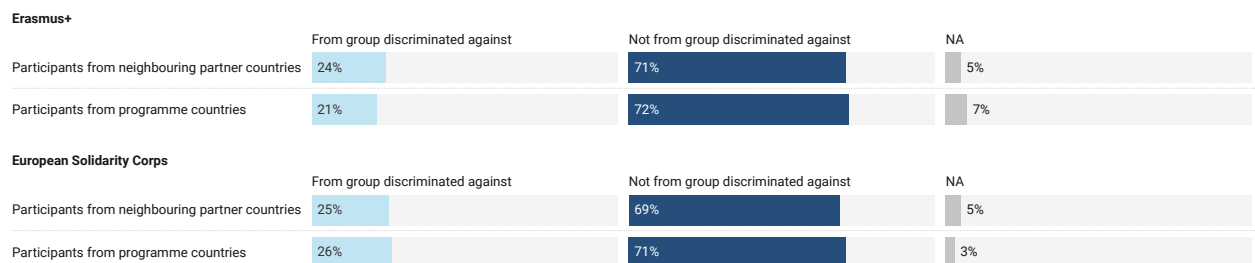
Answers from project participants. E+: Nnpc=588, Npc=6979; ESC Nnpc=360, Npc=2261. Q: Would you say that you are faced with barriers to achieve your full potential?



Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Figure 19. Participants' experience of discrimination outside of the programmes

Answers from project participants. E+: Nnpc=588, Npc=6979; ESC Nnpc=360, Npc=2261. Q: Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group that is discriminated against?



Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Go back to Section 3.1



10.3. ANNEX C: PROJECT TOPICS

Figure 20. Frequency of project topics (youth worker mobilities)

Frequency of project topics of youth worker mobilities for cooperation projects and other projects based on project participants' and project leaders' metadata (percent of projects with a specific topic). Ncoop=2006; Nother=3398.

COOPERATION PROJECTS		OTHER PROJECTS		
Over 39%	Quality and innovation of youth work	44%	Quality and innovation of youth work	39%
11 to 22 %	New learning and teaching methods and approaches	20%	New learning and teaching methods and approaches	22%
	Inclusion of marginalised young people	18%	Inclusion of marginalised young people	20%
	Physical and mental health, well-being	20%	Physical and mental health, well-being	17%
	Environment and climate change	11%	Environment and climate change	12%
	Democracy and inclusive democratic participation	12%	Creativity, arts and culture	14%
7 to 10%	Digital youth work	9%	Digital youth work	8%
	Green skills	9%	Green skills	7%
	European identity, citizenship and values	9%	European identity, citizenship and values	7%
	Key competences development	8%	Key competences development	9%
	Digital skills and competences	8%	Digital skills and competences	8%
	Entrepreneurial learning - entrepreneurship education	7%	Entrepreneurial learning - entrepreneurship education	9%
	Community development	7%	Community development	7%
	International relations and development cooperation	8%	Youth employability	8%
	Creativity, arts and culture	8%	Democracy and inclusive democratic participation	7%
5 to 6 %	Preventing racism and discrimination	6%	Bridging intercultural, intergenerational and social divide	5%
	Development of training courses	5%	International relations and development cooperation	5%
	Prevention of conflicts, post-conflict rehabilitation	5%		
4%	Digital content, technologies and practices	4%	Digital content, technologies and practices	4%
	Promoting gender equality	4%	Promoting gender equality	4%
	Human rights and rule of law	4%	Human rights and rule of law	4%
	Bridging intercultural, intergenerational and social divide	4%	Disabilities	4%
	Initial and continuous training for teachers, trainers and other education staff	4%	Preventing racism and discrimination	4%
	Youth employability	4%		
	Youth policy development	4%		

The rest of the topics appear on 3% or less of the projects
Differences of 5% or more are highlighted in bold

Each Youth Worker Mobility is assigned a maximum of three topics from a pre-defined list.
 Source: [RAY Monitoring Survey \(2024\)](#) · [Get the data](#)

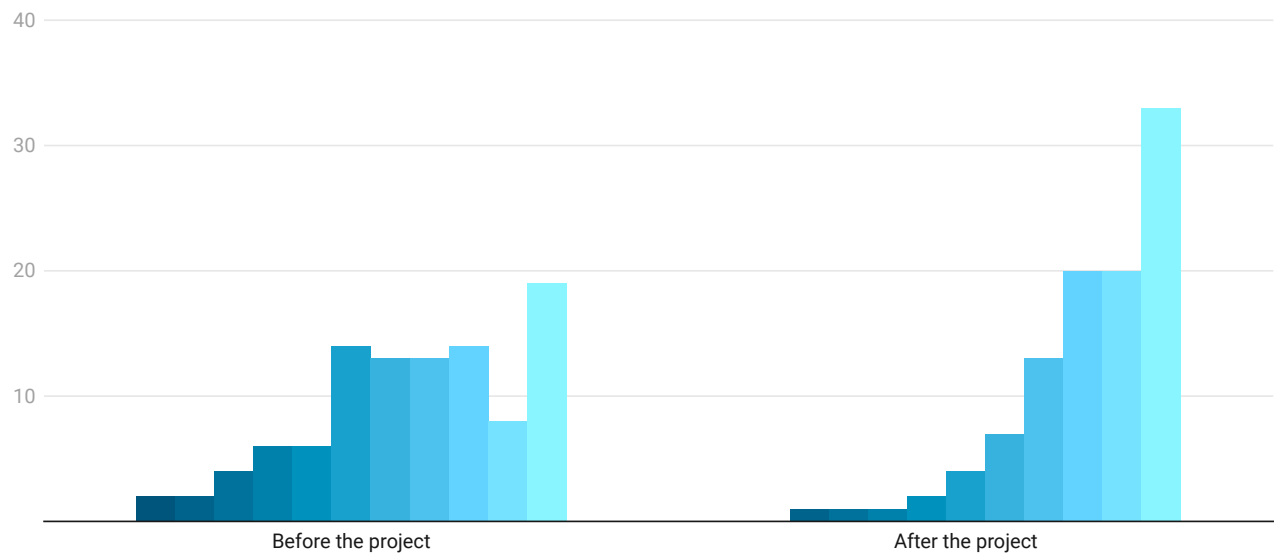
Go back to Section [4.1](#)

10.4. ANNEX D: CHANGE IN CLOSENESS TO EUROPE

Figure 21. Closeness to Europe before and after the project (Erasmus+)

Responses from participants from neighbouring partner countries involved in mobilities for young people within Erasmus+. Y axis shows percent of participants. N=588; Q:(Thinking back,) how close to Europe did you feel before the project / do you feel now?

0 = not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 = very much so



Values in percent. 11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10. Mean = 6 (before) and 8 (after). Median = 7 (before) and 9 (after).

Source: RAY Monitoring survey (2024)

Go back to Section [7.1](#)



10.5. ANNEX E: ALL FIGURES AND TABLES

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