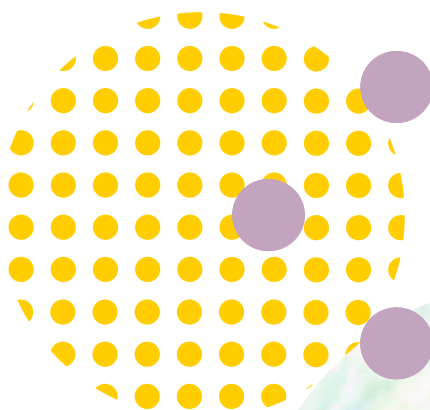
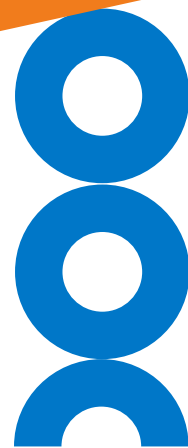


Getting ready for the European Solidarity Corps (ESC)

in the humanitarian field –
preparation of volunteers

VOLUNTEERING • POWER RELATIONS •
WHITE SAVIOUR CONCEPT • VOLUNTEER
PREPARATION • TOOLS



AGA BYRCZEK

Youth worker, trainer, coach and author active in the field since 2003. She holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Wrocław and she could be described as an observer of political and educational trends especially related to interculturality, diversity, inclusion, anti-racism human rights and global education.

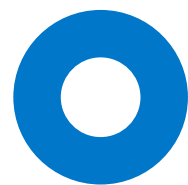


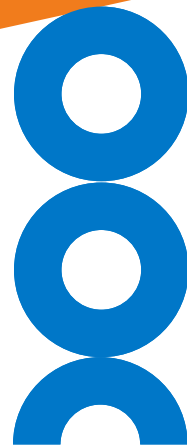
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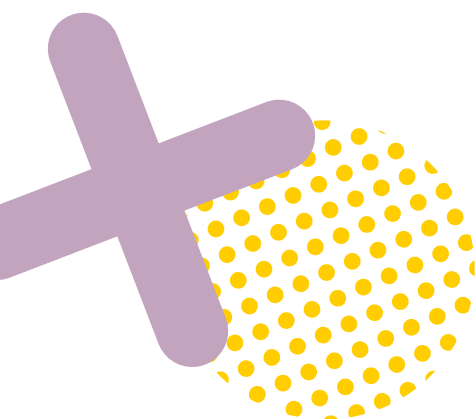
ABSTRACT

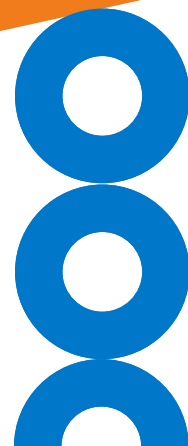
Volunteering activities in the Global South can be an excellent tool to strengthen solidarity, but there is no guarantee. Quality preparation of volunteers before deployment can enhance the solidarity aspect and significantly improve the project. This article is inspired by the experience of managing over 150 volunteers between Europe and the Global South. Potential challenges are being explored, mainly connected with the power dynamics, intercultural differences and volunteer's motivation. This article is intended to be a very practical piece; therefore, a set of concrete tips and tools have been added that practitioners can use while preparing their volunteers for embarking on the humanitarian ESC adventure.

1. Introduction

Opportunities for implementation of volunteering activities in the humanitarian field within the ESC is quite new, but activities in the countries of the Global South were already possible in the previous programmes. Although there are some differences between the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and ESC in humanitarian action, there is a lot to be learnt from the past experiences of the preparation of volunteers and from how their projects went.

This article aims to share learning outcomes from the implementation of over 150 individual EVS activities in the Global South. The first part of the article will focus on the motivation of volunteers and power relations, following the humanitarian principle of "first, do no harm". Afterwards, several practical tips and resources will be shared, which might be helpful in practical work with ESC volunteers.





2. Motivation of volunteers

The first step of the preparation is the motivation of future volunteers. While conducting the interviews with the potential volunteers to send them to the projects in the Global South I can remember two types of motivation the majority of young people had - to live the experience of their lives and to save the world. The first was always creating the feeling of curiosity in me, the saving the world motivation rather creates fear, you could wonder why? Imagine a white volunteer (and let's be honest, the majority of volunteers are white) with beautiful intentions to help and learn, but also with very concrete expectations on what they would like to do, and how they would like to do it, without even knowing the local context. This mix of perspectives coupled with the stereotypical perceptions about the Global South, which we can easily learn from the media, makes the volunteers believe that what they know is always right. However, the paternalistic approach to helping others, poses a danger of creating more harm than good. It definitely needs to be considered and worked with future volunteers in the preparation process.

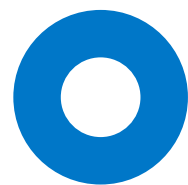
Humanitarian Action has various principles accepted internationally and one of them is to do no harm, which "obliges to prevent and mitigate any negative impact of its actions on affected populations" (UNHCR). There is nothing like good or bad motivation to implement the project, but in some

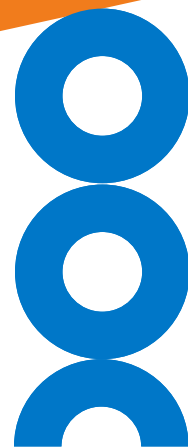
cases, supporting organisations need to put in a bit more effort and give volunteers more tools to maximise the positive and minimise the negative impact. Those tools are mainly understanding how colonialism still influences the hosting societies and our minds, exploring power relations, practising assertive communication and having intercultural learning preparation, especially developing the skill to tolerate ambiguity.

3. Power relations in volunteering projects in the Global South

There are a lot of challenges that volunteers, and other stakeholders involved in ESC projects might face in terms of power relations, while implementing the activity, and sometimes they are so subtle that volunteers often believe that what is happening is beneficial for the project and local communities. Considering that, if volunteers are white, and in the case of European projects this is still the case of the wide majority, they often will be treated with privilege, if they want it or not. They might even be reaffirmed about this privilege by the local community, and we need to acknowledge the colonial history here, and where this imbalance in power relations is coming from.

Let us take the case of Uganda, where I was talking with one of the local teachers about the difficulties they face in schools. They mentioned that one





of the biggest challenges is how to teach the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter), without experiencing it. Other teachers were mentioning that they must teach about the geography of Europe and North America, but the geography of Uganda is kind of forgotten. Those and many more examples confirm how nowadays, in the 21st-century, colonialism is still very vivid, and young people are often taught about the superiority of the white population.

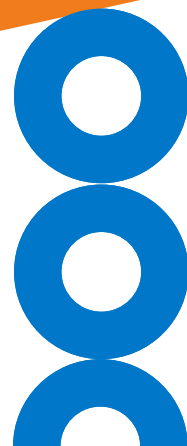
A similar discussion I had with our partners from Ghana, who visited our association in Spain in 2019. We organised a meeting with the representatives of the association of migrants from Ghana, and discussed the strong prevalence of the idea that migrating to Europe will bring happiness and prosperity. Many young people from Ghana, as I was told, decided to migrate not because of their economic situation or political oppression, as many might assume, but due to this unrealistic idea that has been sold - that in Europe they will have a better life. Very often, this is not the case.

A conclusion which can be taken from the above story is, when our volunteers arrive at the place of their activity, with their huge motivation, backpack of experiences, competencies and values, they want to give their best to the project and the local community. This is something very beneficial, but only if the local context is taken into consideration.

Unfortunately, this need to help, conflict of values and not understanding the bigger picture potentially brings challenges.

Let me give you an example from the work camp in Nigeria. A group of volunteers were asked to poison the trees to be cut. A big part of this group refused to implement this activity, and even abandoned the project saying that they came to help, and not to destroy the environment. Those who stayed and decided to discuss the challenge with the local organisation learnt that it needed the land for farming, so poisoning the trees was the easiest way to remove them. The poison, in this case, was the only alternative to exhausting manual work, and they needed to save their physical energy for other tasks they have, it was simply the best way to make the work done. This is a perfect example to understand how both sides of the conflict, having opposite opinions can be right. This is nothing else but one of the main pillars of solidarity, according to the 4TDS Study (Baclijs Knoch & Nicodemi, 2020), EMPATHY. The study lists some of the main elements of empathy: perspective taking - seeing things from the perspective of the other and recognising their 'truth', staying out of judgement and not deciding what is right and wrong. In the context of ESC in the Global South, these competencies are the ones to work on during the preparation, so as to improve the overall success of the project.





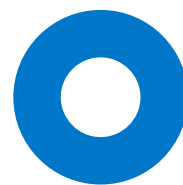
4. What is power?

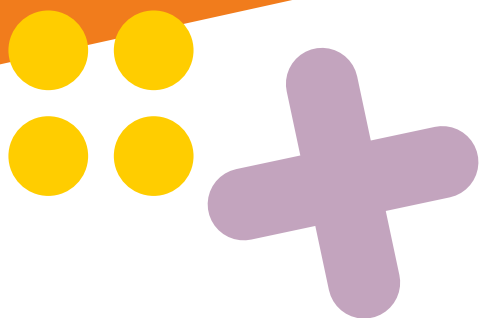
"To put it simply, power is the capacity to make the rules in our environment and make decisions, including decisions on how resources are distributed and who has access to them" (Petkov 2020). There are different types of power – institutional, structural and cultural. In a different life situation, we might experience being in different positions in power relations. The concept of power is omnipresent in our societies, parents have power over their children, bosses over their employees, etc. And power gives us certain privileges. We cannot neglect the existence of power, but what we should do is reflect on how this power is put to use. For example, in the educational context of teachers and pupils. Since one has knowledge that others need, this puts the teacher above the pupils in the ladder of power. The clue to understanding is to see how the power is being used.

Teachers can make positive use of their power by listening to the needs of pupils and discussing them together, showing respect towards their needs, making them feel valued or express gratitude for the existence of this relationship and/or for the possibility to learn from each other. On the contrary, the negative use of power would be making students feel like subordinates, reducing the students' break for the learning benefit, or sentences like "don't speak when I speak". The negative use of power reinforces the position of people on the



ladder of power, brings fear and goes against the values that humanitarian action and solidarity has. The 4TDS study states "solidarity is also seen in recognising that we have privileges and that we are using those privileges for others and not for ourselves", and people who have privilege are more likely to be in positions of power. Therefore, to reinforce the solidarity aspect of volunteering and make the activities even better, it is recommended focusing on the power and privileges in the preparation process. It is very helpful for volunteers to explore their own privileges and make the critical evaluation of what kind of power they have and might have in the volunteering activity, and what is the best way to use their power. Being conscious about one's own power and privileges is the first step to deconstruct the power relations.





5. Intercultural preparation

Working on the intercultural competence of volunteers is one of the pillars for preparation in most European projects, especially the ones in the area of solidarity. If you think that cultural shock (according to W-curve theory) for projects in Europe might be significant, when volunteers are going to implement activities in the Global South, the situation is even more complex. On the one hand, volunteers tend to be more aware of the imminent culture shock, but sometimes those challenges are not only significant, but also well hidden under the surface of the iceberg model of culture.

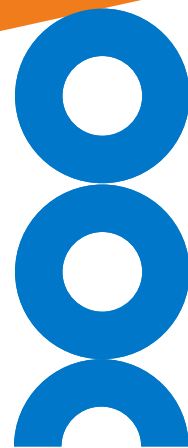
During the preparation process, I would highly advise going back to the roots and tackling the classic model of intercultural learning, composed of 3 main elements: distance to the social roles, empathy and tolerance of ambiguity. This third competence especially might cause some challenges in the implementation of the project. Explaining it in simple words: this competence means that I need to accept I can be right, but the other person who has a different point of view might be right too. In practice, volunteers bring to the projects a lot of learning and experience and want to share all that they have with the local community, but they come to the project and find out that local coordinators do not want them to do things the way they were taught to do. Often, it happens that in the local organisations, activities are implemented in one way,

and this is not necessarily the way volunteers were taught to do things. With good intentions, they are often trying to bring their own ways of work. What happens? Well, it is easy to predict – frustration, feelings that the competencies that volunteers bring are not appreciated. Sometimes those feelings, if not managed properly, might transform into serious conflicts. And here comes the important task that supporting organisations must do in advance - practise the competence of tolerance of ambiguity, understand that what they believe is the best way to do things is not necessarily true. Sometimes, we need to accept that we are right, and the person who does things differently might be right too.

During the preparation process, it is advised to analyse several possible situations (making case studies), like the one mentioned above, and discuss possible approaches to such situations with future volunteers. Reflect on the need for assertive communication, talk about the power of asking questions instead of diving into our own opinions, ask ourselves if we truly understand the context to force our ways of making things on the organisations, etc.

Many of the conflicts that appear in the voluntary projects are those caused by the different set of values, which volunteers and hosting organisations might have (and some other elements hidden in the bottom of the culture iceberg models). To





prevent them and/or minimise their consequences, awareness of the tolerance of ambiguity is key. But understanding why things happen is not enough, and we need to create with our volunteers strategies on what to do when a different situation happens and act quickly to stop the possible conflicts and negative feelings from escalating. The faster we talk about our challenges, the faster we express our feelings, practising the empathy and way of thinking of the other side, the better the quality of our cooperation will be.



6. Practical tips for preparing volunteers

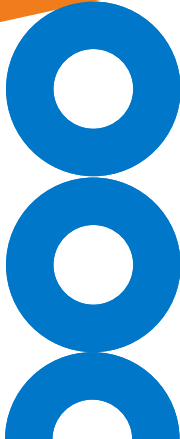




This part consists of 5 practical tips for the supporting organisations of ESC's volunteering activities in the Global South. Please keep in mind that those elements are not the only ones to cover. So, let us dive in and check the suggested issues to be tackled during the preparation process.

6.1. Work on volunteers' motivation

While working on the preparation of volunteers it is important to talk about the real motivation, and if volunteers are not aware of what might happen, organisations should support them to discover it. It is highly recommended focusing on what volunteers want to learn and why, what the ESC project can bring to them, what they would like to change in their lives.

It might happen that the motivation to simply help people will appear, and if it happens it is worth to follow it up. It can be an excellent motivation, very much in line with the concept of solidarity, especially in the form of altruism; for many this motivation comes from the injustice they see, or values like fairness, humanity, compassion and more. On the contrary, this motivation in some cases can be a challenge due to an unequal relationship and the difference of power, and in some cases lead to "white saviour complex".





Crystal Raypole (2021) gives the following definition to describe the concept "white people who consider themselves wonderful helpers to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) — but they "help" for the wrong reasons (and sometimes end up doing more to hurt than help)". She stressed out that the term "refers to those who work from the assumption that they know best what BIPOC folks need."

Those working with volunteers can offer them questions for reflection and guide them so their motivation will be reflecting solidarity instead of white saviourism. Sian Ferguson presented in her article the set of questions which I believe are very helpful for volunteers to reflect on:




- would you trust yourself enough to do this job in your own country?
- would you volunteer abroad if you had no cameras with you?
- are you going to be doing more harm than good?

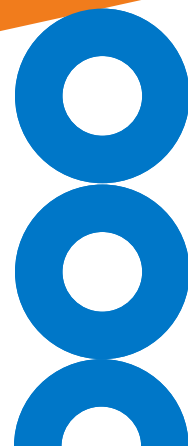
6.2. Expect the unexpected

It is impossible to know everything. Let volunteers know that they will never be 100% prepared. Of course, sending organisations need to inform them about activities, accommodation, practicalities, etc., but often I hear from volunteers comments like "you should have told me that I need to bring black clothes because the country is still in the mourning period, because the king died", "you should have told me that I need to bring

something for the rain", "you should have told me that I need to take off the shoes when entering the flat", etc. Those are just examples, and there are many, many more. The challenge is that each volunteer has different needs and perspectives, and if you would like to prepare them for everything I guess you should write a book, the size of an encyclopaedia.

It is simply impossible to prepare volunteers for everything. Discovering things by themselves is a beauty of the learning process. To prevent disappointment and confusion, it is important to be honest. I explicitly say that it is impossible to know everything, and flexibility is very much needed. Moreover, I recommend volunteers take responsibility for this part of the preparation, investigate by themselves, contact people who have been in the places before, talk with the hosting organisations. My recommendation on what to inform volunteers about are the legal issues.





6.3. Include the global perspective

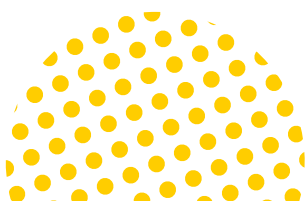
This point needs a separate article on how to do it and what to focus on. When talking about the global perspective it concerns geopolitics, socio-economic issues, racism and colonialism, structural challenges, development issues, and many more. For example, if we take anti-racism defined as the “active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organisational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.” (National Action Committee on the Status of Women International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity), it is visible how complex the issue is. It requires not only the attitudes, but also a lot of knowledge, what majority of the anti-racism activists claim. When the global perspective is discussed, there are more issues included than just anti-racism, but the tendency is similar, changing structures and policies to better share the power and resources around the globe, which is also one of the elements of solidarity. Translating it into practice, the more global perspective is explained to volunteers the better, and there are some concrete elements which might be useful to reflect on in any case. First important point is which image ESC projects send to the world. Most of us like to take photos and spread them around. The question is whether we thought about the kind of image we spread with the photo we post, what the consequences are, and what people can learn from that. And the most important question: are

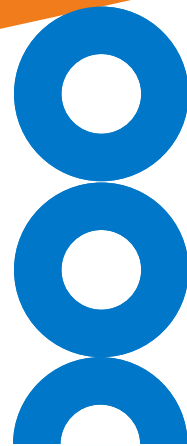
we reinforcing stereotypes of the Global South, or are we breaking them? There has been developed Code of Conduct on Images and Messages by Dóchas, which gives a lot of tips and recommendations, and I will definitely recommend checking this document before any travel to Global South.

Another aspect is the influence on the local economy of the hosting country. In the end, volunteers will live in the community and will form part of the local economic system. Here, they can also be responsible, they can take into consideration the possibility of supporting local businesses, be aware not to support economical activities using child labour, and simply be responsible. Let volunteers know that they can think about their economic activity and what their consequences are, and make decisions on how to spend their money accordingly.

6.4. Prepare volunteers to contribute

Be clear about what you expect from volunteers. They are going to implement the project that means doing the activities that the organisations ask them to do. Some of the activities they will like a lot, and some not that much, but well someone needs to do them. Moreover, it will happen for sure that volunteers will have a problem seeing the direct impact of their activities. It is the task of the supporting organisations to prepare them for that. Especially for implementing activities that do not make a lot of sense for them at the first sight.





Hosting organisations should also be asked to provide orientation on arrival, explaining how things that they will be doing are contributing to society. This helps a lot!

6.5. Security training is a must

This should be implemented in collaboration between the sending and hosting organisations. Volunteers need to know AND UNDERSTAND that there might be some things that are not recommended to do or places that they should not go. The part of knowing is easy, the part of UNDERSTANDING is quite difficult.

I remember myself, during my first trip when I was very young. I joined an educational programme in India, and I felt permanently controlled by the organisers. I was always told not to go alone, not to visit specific places, etc. And my independent European mind was telling me, the people here are not independent, but I am, so I can go alone and explore. And since nothing has happened this time, I convinced myself that I was right! Now with that perspective, I must say that there are certain risks, and often rules that the organisations are suggesting are simply for our good.

The task of the supporting organisations is to prepare volunteers to understand that they are not able to inform them what to do and what not to do, but prepare the ground for the hosting organisation, so the volunteers will be able to receive



and understand the information well. During the preparation, it is recommended warning them that they might be in a different socio-political situation, which might reflect on their safety, for example in some places the LGBTIQ+ rights are not respected, or even having a flag on your backpack can be illegal. It is often recommended not to join any political manifestation or be around politicians during the election period since in some places the risks increase in those moments. Finally, providing contacts to embassies and informing in advance about the project, so for example in case an earthquake happens, the embassy will be aware of the need to offer help.





7. Advice for future volunteers

After each volunteering project in the Global South, I was asking volunteers to provide advice for future ones. From this a publication, "100 pieces of advice for the future volunteers", published by Cazalla Intercultural (2015), has been developed. All pieces of advice are structured in categories like how to prepare, what to do during the project, advice related to work, leisure time, practicalities, etc. Some of the pieces of advice are very general like "Bring your sense of humour!" others are very concrete and practical, like: "Get informed about specifics of your hosting country, place and organisation", "read a lot about the country you are going to (culture, history, foods, dos and don'ts)", or "Take a digital copy of all your documents". There is a lot of advice connected with being open to people, new experiences, challenges, and especially to be open to listen: "Listen to what people are telling you. You can only hear their stories then and learn a lot from them!".

One chapter is dedicated to culture and the culture shock, where my favourite advice is "be ready for challenge and misunderstanding", since those things will happen anyway, and it is simply a beautiful call to embrace the uncertainty and learn from it. Finally, I would like to share a few pieces of advice that even if well known, are worth repeating from time to time, and get motivated.

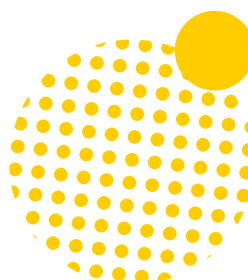
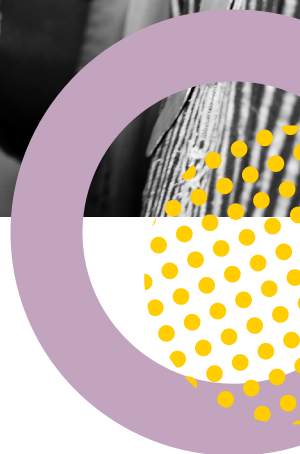
- You may have problems... but everything can be solved!
- Leave all your prejudices back home, interact with as many people as possible, travel during your free time, and don't be afraid to try new things!
- Enjoy every minute. There will be stressful times, boring times, challenging times, and fun times. Enjoy it all. It is all part of the learning experience. Be happy!
- Be yourself. Whatever happens, whomever you are with, always be yourself. It is the only way to know who will truly accept you and the most effective way to assess yourself if you need more improvement.
- Develop! Don't avoid going outside your "comfort zone". The most important things that you will learn during your service will come from times when you started to do something that was new to you and different in many ways from your previous experience. Thanks to that you will become a different person and you will discover many new things about yourself!
- Grow from every fight you will have, every relationship that you will experience, ups and downs that happen. Be better than yesterday!





8. Conclusion

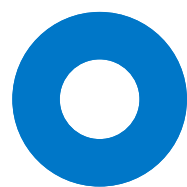
Volunteering activities within the framework of the European Solidarity Corps in the Global South are an amazing opportunity to promote solidarity among European youth. They can also contribute to strengthening the empathy and inclusion, help to understand the privileges people have and motivate volunteers to use them for the benefit of others, create the feeling of togetherness, improve the relationships with people, better understand the global systems and interconnections, what might lead to increase in active citizenship, acting towards more global justice, and many more. Volunteering activities can contribute to all of those, but there is no guarantee it will happen. There are some threats, like the global tendency to compete instead of cooperate, systems of racism and inequality embedded in our societies, which sometimes people reproduce unconsciously, and the general lack of knowledge and understanding. All those threats can be reduced by quality preparation of volunteers before deployment, which should cover not only the practicalities, but also different aspects of solidarity.

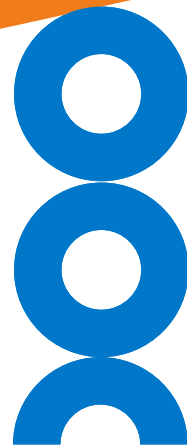




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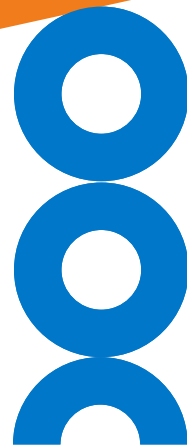
SALTO European Solidarity Corps

SALTO ESC supports National Agencies and organisations in the youth field and beyond with the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme. The mission is to explore the potential of solidarity as a core value in European societies and to promote the use of the European Solidarity Corps as a tool for understanding and living solidarity. SALTO ESC coordinates networking activities, training, seminars and events that will support the quality implementation of the programme and maximise its impact. By doing this, SALTO ESC contributes to building a European Solidarity Corps community of organisations.

SALTO ESC is hosted by OeAD. The OeAD is the national agency for the implementation of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps in Austria. SALTO ESC is part of a European network of SALTO Resource Centres with the mission to improve the quality and impact of the EU youth programmes as well as to support and develop European youth work.

Find us online at www.salto-youth.net, www.oead.at and www.salto-youth.net/solidarity





EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

This article is part of “Europe talks Solidarity” – a series of events and publications that offers a platform for the exploration of the concept of Solidarity, initiated by SALTO ESC. The discussion on Solidarity benefits from inputs from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. However, the opinions and views expressed in the articles in this series do not necessarily reflect those of SALTO ESC.

With this second round of articles, developed in 2021, SALTO ESC was looking for perspectives on Solidarity connected to the EU humanitarian aid field, as “Volunteering in humanitarian aid field” was integrated into the European Solidarity Corps programme in 2022.

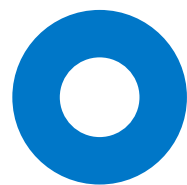
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