

Strengthening Youth
VOLUNTEERING

Recognition of Youth Volunteering

DISCUSSION PAPER

October 2026



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1. Introduction

Youth volunteering has a long tradition in Europe. Every year, young people contribute their time, energy and ideas to organisations and communities across Europe and beyond. At the same time, organisations invest significant time, resources and expertise in creating and supporting meaningful volunteering opportunities. Together, they contribute to stronger communities, solidarity and positive change. Yet, youth volunteering and the contributions of both volunteers and organisations are not always sufficiently visible, recognised or valued.

Strengthening the conditions for youth volunteering is at the heart of the [Strategic National Agency Cooperation on Volunteering](#). Bringing together 15 National Agencies for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and three SALTO Resource Centres, and coordinated by SALTO European Solidarity Corps, the cooperation works towards a stronger, more inclusive and impactful European volunteering landscape.

The Symposium “Recognising Youth Volunteering: From Experience to Impact”, taking place from 3rd to 5th of November 2026 in Dublin/Ireland brings different perspectives from across Europe together to explore how youth volunteering is recognised today, where gaps and barriers remain, and what could be strengthened in the future.

This discussion paper focuses specifically on the recognition of youth volunteering and its wider value – for young people, organisations, communities and society. It explores different dimensions of recognition and considers how the contribution, role and impact of youth volunteering can become more visible and better valued.

Rather than providing predetermined answers, the paper aims to provide a common starting point for discussion. Readers are invited to reflect on the questions posed and consider the suitability of different potential ways forward in their own contexts. This process is intended to support Symposium participants in identifying the aspects of recognition that would be most valuable to strengthen the recognition of youth volunteering and explore practical ways to increase the visibility and recognition of youth volunteering to ensure that young people’s contributions as volunteers are truly valued.

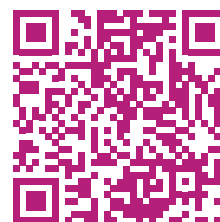
The reflections will feed into the discussions in Dublin and contribute to our shared work towards a future in which youth volunteering is recognised for the value it creates – for young people, organisations, communities and society.

2. Why Recognition of Youth Volunteering Matters Now

2.1. 30th Anniversary of EU Youth and Volunteering Programmes

2026 marks the 30th anniversary of the EU Youth Volunteering and Solidarity programmes. They have provided a strong and positive impact on a variety of different levels over the years. Whilst more recent data is lacking, **in 2019, 34% of youth stated that they had engaged in organised volunteering activities within the past 12 months. This figure has been continuously increasing, from 24% in 2011** and shows that volunteering is an important activity for Europe's youth going beyond the EU youth programmes themselves. Recent trends however show that young people are engaging less in more permanent continuous volunteering roles in their communities and seeking out more sporadic and ad hoc task-based and more informal volunteering.

READ MORE ON MOBILITY
OF YOUNG VOLUNTEERS:



These trends demonstrate that while policies and programmes for youth volunteering have grown and improved over this period, there is still untapped potential, especially in how volunteering in different forms and contexts, in line with evolving trends and practices, is recognised and valued. The [2022 Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers](#) put forward the need for a stronger strategic focus on cross-border youth volunteering within youth policies and identified specific areas for improvement. Several years later, these recommendations remain valid in order to increase the potential for cross-border volunteers and also offer relevant guidance for in-country, local level youth volunteering whether full or part time and online or offline.

2.2. Increasing Vulnerabilities & Volunteering Impact

In an increasingly dangerous and precarious world, where people of all generations, but particularly young people, experience increasing vulnerabilities to a wide range of threats and dangers, **the contribution of young volunteers in building resilience and meeting societal and community needs is vital.** As well as the positive societal impact from youth volunteers on a variety of causes such as: combatting climate change; countering fake news and disinformation; strengthening social cohesion and improving health & well-being through sports and health-focussed peer support initiatives. Youth volunteering also directly benefits young people themselves.

The level of recognition and support given to youth volunteering in different fields and domains, including legally, is influential in determining the overall societal impact achieved, as well as the benefits to young people themselves. Increasing the recognition of youth volunteering and ensuring its inclusion as a core strategic issue in youth policy, in addition to other policy fields such as: Education; Population Preparedness; and the European Democracy Shield, capitalises on the high potential that youth volunteering has to drive social, economic, and civic development, and should not be overlooked.

2.3. Contribution to Democracy, Employability & Inclusion

Youth volunteering strengthens democratic engagement not only because active young citizens have a direct positive impact on societal needs, but also because **young people who volunteer are also more likely to vote and participate in public life more generally**. Volunteering can also increase trust in institutions and strengthen community bonds between and across generations, decreasing polarisation. Youth-led initiatives also have the potential to solve local problems more quickly and efficiently with a more accurate evidence-base anchored in personal and grassroots experiences.

READ MORE ON HOW YOUTH
VOLUNTEERING INCREASES
YOUNG VOTER TURNOUT:



Through the acquisition of competences, youth volunteering can also boost youth employability. Youth volunteering addresses youth employment challenges and skills gaps by enhancing competencies in line with the lifelong learning principles underpinning the [European Education Area](#). The opportunity to develop transversal, civic, and professional skills, including leadership, teamwork, & intercultural competences, and have them validated, provides an ideal complementary framework alongside formal education, training and employment opportunities. In this way volunteering contributes to the objectives of the [European Skills Agenda](#) and the [European Union of Skills](#).

Youth volunteering also has **high potential to increase social inclusion through an increased sense of civic belonging** and to unlock more equal opportunities through proactive diversity engagement measures. Mental and physical well-being is also improved through cause and impact driven activities. They lead to a sense of achievement and reduce feelings of isolation and disempowerment experienced by ever-increasing numbers of young people.

3. The Changing Landscape of Youth Volunteering

3.1. What is Youth Volunteering?

For discussions on the recognition of youth volunteering it is important to understand what is being referred to with “youth volunteering”. For a holistic discussion, it is helpful to consider the **defining characteristics of volunteering** as identified by the European Commission in 2011.

When it comes to volunteering, each country has different notions, definitions and traditions. Volunteering is defined as all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal. Volunteers act under their own free will, according to their own choices and motivations and do not seek financial gain. Volunteering is a journey of solidarity and a way for individuals and associations to identify and address human, social or environmental needs and concerns. Volunteering is often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative. (European Commission, 2011)

This description however, despite its broad nature, does not fully incorporate initiatives such as National Civic Service Schemes which, while not strictly volunteering, often reflect a close and complementary aspect of volunteering-related youth policies. In order to be able to broaden the scope of what activities fall under the umbrella of youth volunteering it is helpful to consider an emerging narrative around the consideration of **three different modalities in which citizens, including young people, organise themselves in collective action for the common good**. These are:

3.1.1. Associative Volunteering: Traditional organised volunteering

Associational life, encompassing voluntary organisations, NGOs, nonprofits, and free associations, regardless of specific national or organisational form, have been the essential foundation of organised (formal) volunteering over the last century. They remain attractive and relevant for a large number of young people and consequently, these groups are the principal focus and key partners for the majority of youth volunteering, particularly that delivered through, and supported by, public schemes. **Formally organised youth volunteering in this framework can be conducted offline or online, on a full or part time basis and with limited or open ended durations.** The European Solidarity Corps Individual and Teams volunteering, where volunteering organisations play a fundamental role in providing the volunteer experience, fit in this group.

3.1.2. Informal volunteering: Community organising

Youth volunteers can also engage offline and/or online in diverse, informal settings such as neighbourhood groups, parents' committees, emergency relief networks, local advocacy coalitions, and virtual support channels. These initiatives are often without formal organisation or registration and the engagement is generally part time but in some cases can also be full time. **There can be some cross over between volunteering and leisure/ recreational activities particularly as concerns volunteer-led community groups.** These groups often have a more internal membership benefit focus as opposed to a wider societal common good approach. An example of this could be a local young volunteer-led knitting club for young people. The initial focus is very much on the needs and interests of the members as concerns knitting. However, engagement with this club, and the youth volunteering for and within it, can prevent loneliness and isolation of the young people involved. This leads to an auxiliary overall societal benefit that goes beyond the initial self-serving focus and purpose of the initiative. European Solidarity Corps solidarity projects generally fall in this category.

3.1.3. Third-party volunteering: Public and private entities as organisers of volunteering taking place in another entity

The landscape of citizen engagement for people of all ages but particularly youth is rapidly evolving. This is leading to a more complex and often ambiguous array of actions that challenge traditional definitions of "volunteering". As regards youth volunteering, there is a spectrum of emerging and hybrid forms of opportunities. Structured employee volunteering initiatives where companies support participation of their young employees in community projects, and various national programmes specifically designed to facilitate youth engagement in civic life and public service are examples. **National youth civic service schemes such as those found in Italy and France fall under the umbrella of this third tier.**

These diverse forms of youth volunteering facilitated through third parties can be organised on a formal basis and share some common features with traditional associational youth volunteering. They do however most often operate under different structures, motivations, and expectations as compared with traditional associational youth volunteering and can also be in the context of informal groups. Consequently, a degree of uncertainty, and sometimes controversy, arises regarding whether these activities can, or should, be strictly considered 'volunteering' in the conventional sense. This uncertainty raises the need for broader discussions about recognition and definition in the modern context of youth civic participation and volunteering.

Youth engagement forms like **service learning** that integrate community service with academic (formal education) instruction and reflection, blur the lines between ed-

educational requirements and voluntary commitment. Similarly, the concept of **social prescribing**, where health professionals can refer young patients to volunteer for different causes as a response to different physical and/ or mental health challenges represents another novel approach to engagement where elements of free will and compulsion need to be given special attention.

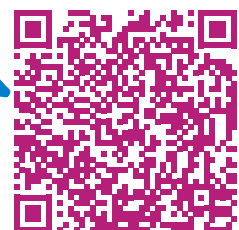


EXPLORE SERVICE LEARNING

Service-learning is a pedagogical strategy based on including community engagement in students' curricula. It is normally associated with higher education, where it provides academic credit for education occurring in a traditionally non-formal setting. That way, students contribute to society while they develop academically, civically, and personally, managing to reflect on their experiences in a systematic and critical manner. The three fundamental components of this reciprocal exchange of knowledge are "serving", "reflecting", and "learning". The underlying idea and main achievement of Service-learning is that students become 'whole humans,' with social and personal competences on top of solid academic skills, also encouraging them to become responsible and observer citizens. Service Learning is also a recognised pedagogical approach for primary and secondary level education.

Furthermore, the massive **mobilisation of young volunteers often required for big events**, such as international sporting competitions or cultural festivals, relies heavily on large-scale, fixed-term commitments from young people. These increasingly popular and highly demanded opportunities often differ significantly from more traditional youth volunteering and have higher similarities with part-time gig-economy style employment than the models of youth volunteering reflected in public policies and programmes.

READ MORE ON
THE GIG-ECONOMY:



ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE OF THIRD PARTY VOLUNTEERING FROM MONTENEGRO

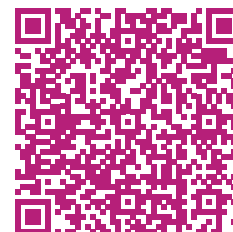
Networks of volunteer clubs in high schools across Montenegro coordinated by ADP-ZID are part of the National Volunteer Service framework. The clubs were developed to promote solidarity, active citizenship, and youth participation among young people, while also supporting the development and recognition of competences gained through volunteering. Through the volunteer clubs, young people participate in community actions, environmental campaigns, peer-support activities, humanitarian initiatives, and local development projects.



3.1.4. The European Solidarity Corps

Sitting mainly within the first volunteering model described here, the [European Solidarity Corps](#) is the EU funding programme for young people wishing to engage in solidarity activities in a variety of areas ranging from helping the disadvantaged to humanitarian aid, as well as contributing to health and environmental action across the EU and beyond. The programme finances projects to engage young people in solidarity activities addressing societal challenges through volunteering or by providing financial support to set up their own solidarity projects.

READ MORE ON THE
EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS:



Since the launch of the new-generation programme in 2021:

- More than 886,000 young people have expressed an interest in joining the European Solidarity Corps by registering;
- Close to 10,000 projects have received programme grants;
- Nearly 4,500 organisations have participated in projects;
- More than 90,000 opportunities for young people have been created under the programme;
- More than 50% of participants in volunteering activities have been people with fewer opportunities;
- About 63% of the total number of programme participants have been women.

The programme's ambition is not only to be more inclusive but also greener and more digital and is open to individuals aged 18 to 30 (35 for humanitarian aid) and to organisations in EU and partner countries. **The investment in the European Solidarity Corps at the EU level is largely based on inclusion and youth engagement and participation strategies** but other strategies and frameworks are relevant such as: the [EU Preparedness Union Strategy](#); [European Democracy Shield](#); [EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness](#); and [EU Civil Society Strategy](#).

3.2. E-volunteering & Urban and Rural Volunteering

3.2.1 Online Volunteering

Beyond the European Solidarity Corps and other well established youth volunteering mobility programmes at national level there are new and emerging youth volunteering modalities in Europe, one of which is online volunteering. Also known as E-volunteering, this model relies on digital tools and platforms, allowing for remote engagement that can help young people overcome geographic or physical barriers in communication, coordination, and task completion in relation to their voluntary en-

agement. **Common e-volunteering tasks popular with young people include social media management, content creation, administrative support, online training and workshops, translations, advocacy, and virtual peer mentorship.** However, the digital nature of this form of youth volunteering introduces specific challenges, particularly concerning its legal and societal recognition, data protection, privacy, tracking volunteer contributions, safeguarding and managing online conduct.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE FROM SLOVENIA



In the draft of the regulation “Odlok o strategiji razvoja prostovoljstva do 2030” (Draft Decree on the National Volunteering Development Strategy Slovenia 2030) (Evid. no. 2024-3130-0044) there are explicit references to e-volunteering as one of the forms of volunteering to be promoted in addressing societal challenges. While this marked an important formal recognition of e-volunteering in an EU national strategic document, in the final approved version it is not singled out as prominently. It is partly integrated into broader sections (such as different forms of volunteering and digitalisation, pages 7 & 17).

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE FROM SPAIN



The region of Valencia (Spain) where a new Volunteering Law was approved in May 2025 explicitly includes digital volunteering as a recognised modality, alongside measures to ensure proper accreditation, training and insurance coverage in volunteering. Other regions of Spain such as Castilla-La Mancha, Navarra and the Canary Islands are in the process of reforming their own laws and have opened consultations that include e-volunteering as a key element.

3.2.2 Urban and Rural Volunteering

Another determinant which can define how youth volunteering is recognised in different parts of Europe is connected to the fact that urban volunteering, as compared with that located in more rural settings, often benefits from more substantial government investment, access to institutional networks, and public visibility. Rural volunteering programmes tend to operate on very minimal support and rely on limited resources and volunteer goodwill (European Economic and Social Committee 2021). The lack of rural volunteering, including that targeted at young people further undermines the delivery of essential services, like healthcare and education, to these rural communities (Eurofound 2023). Urban areas generally benefit from the fact that many Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are based in urban areas often because

they have a better digital infrastructure and accessible transportation as compared to rural areas where logistical barriers like long travel distances, under-resourced organisations and poor internet access are common. These factors, along with the demographic and cultural differences between urban and rural communities (where urban communities have populations of lower average age as compared with rural areas), reinforce lower volunteer participation in rural areas across all age groups but particularly for youth.

The extent and complexity of the economic and strategic political investment in youth volunteering in different countries and across urban/ rural divides is a reflection of the recognition given to it. This is also highly relevant for the sustainability of the different programmes and their capacity in offering equal opportunities to young people of different situations and backgrounds, an aspect that is a key priority for the EU youth strategy.

4. Understanding Recognition

Within this European context, the national dimension of the recognition of youth volunteering in Europe is significantly shaped by the differing levels of policy and legal development across the continent. How this manifests in practice can be observed by the data available in the [Youth WIKI](#) as follows.

4.1. National Frameworks and Trends

Structured national frameworks & explicit legal provisions supporting youth volunteering.	Luxembourg, Italy, Germany, and Lithuania
Official frameworks reflecting that youth volunteering significantly benefits society by promoting active citizenship, enhancing social participation, and strengthening social cohesion.	Estonia (Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2030) Lithuania (National Youth Policy Action Plan 2023–2027) Slovakia (broader youth and civil society policies)
Lacking a dedicated national strategy for youth volunteering. It is typically addressed indirectly as a component of broader youth sector development strategies or through strategic projects focused on civil society and youth development.	Croatia, Poland, and the Czech Republic

High numbers of young people registered as association members, yet the proportion who are actively involved is smaller.	Luxembourg
High youth engagement in both formal and informal volunteering.	Austria
Lower youth participation in formal volunteering (9-9.5% of young people are involved). Youth tend towards more occasional or informal engagement.	Poland and the Czech Republic
Recent decline in both formal and informal volunteering activities but reporting a rise in online and more occasional forms of volunteering.	Slovakia

4.2. Youth Volunteering Contexts

The Youth Wiki also indicates that the predominant youth volunteering contexts across Europe include: Sport, Culture, Social Services, Education, Environment and Emergency/crisis-related activities. In countries such as Poland and Malta, young people are involved in sports, youth organisations, and rescue-related activities, alongside cultural/art group participation. In contrast, Lithuania and Slovakia show a more socially oriented pattern of engagement, including social and health services, youth work, community support and environmental activities, with Slovakia in particular reporting a high share of environmental volunteering (40.1%). Austria reflects a mixed pattern, with strong participation in sports and increasing interest in environmental volunteering. Some countries implement their own youth volunteering programmes.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES FROM GERMANY AND AUSTRIA



The “Voluntary Social Year” in Germany where young people aged 16 to 26 spend 6 to 18 months doing full-time volunteer work in fields like health-care, social care, culture, or sports.

[Read more on the Voluntary Social Year!](#)

In Austria, the “Volunteer Year” enables young people to spend 6-12 months contributing in their field of choice: Both in Austria and abroad, they can volunteer in social services or environmental protection programmes. Abroad, they can also participate in a peace service or memorial service. If the programme lasts at minimum 10 months, it can also replace mandatory civil service for young men.

[Read more on the Volunteer Year!](#)



4.3. Motivations and Drivers for Youth Volunteering

These varied situations and strategies presented in the Youth WIKI can be linked to, and have their origins in, **different motivations and drivers** that have been the basis of their evolution and the development of their different aspects and features. Three of these are explored here.

Solidarity appears to be the strongest driver of youth volunteering strategies where volunteering is framed in terms of active citizenship, social participation, community support and societal cohesion. Croatia frames youth volunteering as promoting active citizenship and social cohesion, focusing on socially excluded groups, young people, and integration into primary and secondary education. Poland shows a similar focus on inclusion, with past programmes like Youth Joined in Action (2016–2019) targeting young parents, youth with disabilities, and socially excluded youth. Lithuania’s National Youth Policy Action Plan (2023-2027) connects volunteering to youth citizenship and civic engagement. This solidarity focus is also strong in Austria and Slovakia, where volunteering is concentrated in areas like social services, humanitarian aid and environmental causes. Solidarity is also stated as the primary driver for volunteering Law No. 45/2016 in Albania.

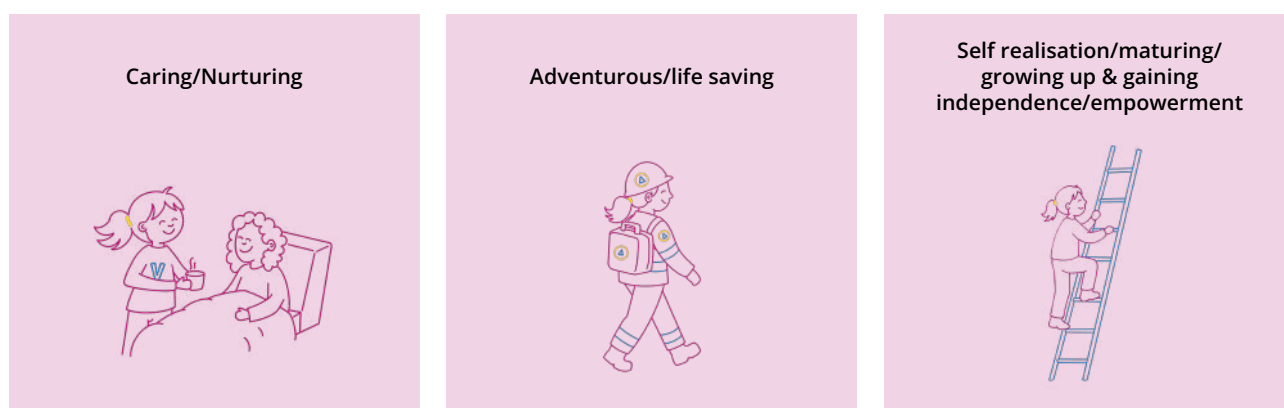
Competitiveness is linked to successful labour market entry, employability and the development of social skills leading to increased social inclusion. In Malta, the National Programme for the Youth Voluntary Work Scheme (2015) addresses these aspects by aiming to enhance young people’s skills, employability, and active citizenship, while also supporting organisations in attracting young volunteers and building their capacity. Italy’s Universal Civic Service is a programme aimed at easing the transition of young people from education into the workforce. Validation of learning acquired through volunteering also contributes to this aspect and several schemes and programmes have this embedded as a recognition practice. Competitiveness is a strong and rapidly growing driver for volunteering in Albania, expressed through the National

Youth Strategy's links to labour-market integration and initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee, and now crystallised in the recent amendment recognising volunteering experiences as work experience in recruitment processes.

Intergenerational fairness is an emerging policy issue for consideration at the EU level and currently only visibly addressed in formal programmes in the European Solidarity Corps European Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas (VTHPA) future planning. However there are several schemes at member state level that could be considered to fall under the volunteering umbrella such as intergenerational shared housing projects in the Netherlands. These initiatives are designed to pair young people (often students) with elderly residents. They are a recognised, successful model for reducing senior loneliness while alleviating student housing shortages. A prominent example is the Humanitas retirement home in Deventer, which has operated such a programme for over a decade. Evidence on reducing feelings of loneliness, isolation and disconnectedness in youth is yet to emerge.

4.4. Societal Perception

Who the youth volunteers are, how society and volunteering organisations see them and how they see themselves, are important considerations at the centre of recognition discussions. **The motivation of youth volunteers and their sense of personal impact can be considered to fall into different categories.**



Evidence from the recent exhibition for the [30th anniversary of the EU youth volunteering and solidarity programmes](#) indicates that for the featured EVS and European Solidarity Corps volunteers all categories are relevant and applicable to different degrees.

This typology model provides a useful framework for reflection on how the beneficiaries of youth volunteer-

READ MORE ON THE
STORIES OF SOLIDARITY:



ing and the wider society recognise and understand the role of the young volunteers. Many employers for example would perhaps only recognise a young person's volunteering experience as being in the context of one of the first two categories. They may fail to recognise the strength and value of volunteering as a personal development and skills acquisition experience that would be more in line with the third category. **This situation, where employers and other stakeholders e.g. parents, teachers, social workers, guidance counsellors and the broader public lack a more complete recognition of the value of youth volunteering can lead to reduced recognition of the value of volunteering amongst young people themselves.** In turn, leading to lower take-up of volunteering opportunities amongst young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities.



In general, in Europe it can be observed that society understands and recognises the positive value of youth volunteering, whether this be for service delivery, combating climate change, improving social inclusion & societal bonds in communities, or crisis prevention & response. However, this is not always the case. For some, youth volunteering can be felt as a threat to employment, particularly when young volunteers are active in public entities or when their volunteering involves undertaking the same tasks and roles as paid employees alongside them.

4.5. Legal Recognition

Concerning the legal recognition for youth volunteering, experiences vary across European countries. In a large part of southern, central and eastern European countries, the tradition and culture of volunteering is not so embedded in society, and in living memory the understanding of volunteering is more rooted in compulsory activities than those based on free will. In these countries the legal status and recognition of volunteering in the law is an essential starting point for any other recognition at societal or individual level. In other countries in more northern and western Europe this specific legal recognition of volunteering is not a pre-requisite for societal recognition and/or the existence of a common and shared understanding of the importance of youth volunteering. **The way in which legal frameworks for youth volunteering treat formal and informal volunteering as well as full and part-time/ ad hoc volunteering and e-volunteering are also important elements that differ from country to country.**

How public authorities support youth volunteering through investing in volunteering



infrastructure organisations such as platforms and networks dedicated to improving the quality and impact of youth volunteering is an important determinant of legal and societal recognition. This is also the case concerning investment in other types of organisational support such as the training and funding for volunteer managers and mentors. If and when these professions, and others associated with youth volunteering, are underpinned by reliable and robust quality-assured training and qualification frameworks then this also has a positive impact on the overall recognition of volunteering as it can be considered to be part of a more valid and structured framework based in a professional context.

4.6. Self-Recognition

How young people themselves recognise their own volunteering and that of their peers and where they see the value for others, themselves and the broader common good is largely determined by societal perception and legal recognition. This self-recognition from young people as to the value and role of youth volunteering ultimately influences which young people become volunteers. The changemaking agenda is an important consideration in this regard and can determine where on the spectrums of “self change” and “change for others” young volunteers place themselves and/ or are placed by their volunteer managers and general volunteering context. Youthpass, an official tool within the European Solidarity Corps, has a self-reflection methodology at its core and focuses on identifying and documenting learning outcomes. A similar tool for self reflection on community impact (change for others) could bring added value.

It can be seen that a high number of European Solidarity Corps Volunteers prefer to include this experience on their CVs as a “trainee” role rather than volunteering. Requests for recommendation letters from volunteering host organisations exhibit preferences to refer to their engagement as being a trainee rather than a volunteer. An underlying reason for this is the **imbalance of recognition in society and from employers, peers and family as concerns “trainee” and “volunteer” with traineeships having a distinct preference and advantage in terms of perceived value and legitimacy over volunteer placements.**

4.7. Media Recognition

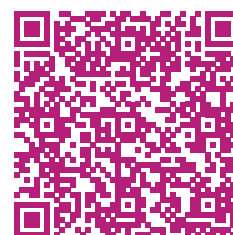
Recognition that youth volunteering has a value beyond “task delivery” is by no means universal in Europe. Recognising and understanding that youth volunteering is an essential part of democracy and an important component (indicator) of thriving civil

society and inclusive communities based on collaboration and mutual support is lacking in many contexts and situations. **How volunteering is portrayed in the media has a key influence on this, and on the overall recognition of the role of young volunteers and their purpose in the wider community.** This pertains to the wider population but is also the case for youth and volunteering organisations and amongst young people themselves. Frequently, media interest spikes, and is only clearly visible for a wider audience, in the context of crisis volunteering when large numbers of young volunteers make themselves available to address common community challenges. This situation leads to the recognition and understanding of youth volunteering from the general public as being something which brings immediate reward, relief and benefits rather than a more complex action that is part of our overall democratic communities and societal fabric.

The question of how popular media attention treats and addresses volunteers and volunteering under the 3 different youth volunteering categories previously described is important for overall recognition of young volunteers. The question of how they treat differently the reporting on volunteers of different ages is also significant for the recognition of youth volunteering specifically.

Media reporting on youth volunteering typically focuses on macro numbers e.g. in crisis situations when huge numbers of young volunteers make themselves available to support societal needs. At the other end of the scale they also place a focus on individual volunteer personal stories with young volunteers as “heroes” being a typical story line. The media industry (traditional, emerging influencers and everything in between) is an important and significant creator of public opinion. How they portray young volunteers and youth volunteering has an impact on overall societal recognition and understanding of the phenomenon.

READ THE ARTICLE
“WE CAN’T ALL BE HEROES”:



The choice of which volunteer’s story is told and which of the three motivational models they represent, has an impact on which type and context of youth volunteering is more highly recognised and better understood at a given moment. Currently there are insufficient opportunities to proactively engage with the media to help curate stories and reports that can lead to more complete recognition of youth volunteering in the general population that can be of overall value for a broader and more complete recognition of youth volunteering.

4.8. Recognition of Learning

As has been mentioned, volunteering is an important space for acquisition of skills and competences, learning and personal development. This aspect, and the associated possibilities for the validation of learning outcomes that go along with it, can increase recognition for youth volunteering. In other words, validation of learning outcomes acquired through volunteering can be a contributing factor for recognition. Care should be taken however that the necessary efforts are made to ensure that this recognition emphasises that volunteering needs to be clearly understood, and seen, as complementary to employment, formal education and training opportunities, not an alternative.

4.9. Investment in Recognition

The extent and complexity of the economic and strategic political investment in youth volunteering in the different countries and across urban/ rural divides is a reflection of the recognition given to it. Public youth volunteering schemes can be significant in this regard, as are recognition initiatives such as Volunteer Cards and Volunteer Awards. These issues are highly relevant for sustainability of the different programmes and their capacity to offer equal opportunities to young people of different situations and backgrounds - a key priority for the EU youth strategy.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE FROM ALBANIA



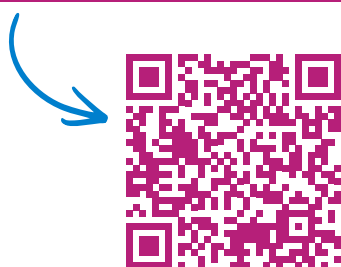
Albania's state recognition instrument is the volunteer booklet (libreza e vullnetarit) together with the Register of Volunteer Contracts — the national equivalent of a volunteer card/passport. It is mandated by Law No. 45/2016, under which the volunteer concludes a contract with the provider and is then issued a volunteering booklet, administered through the national employment and skills agency. Implementation is weak, however: the sub-legal acts were adopted only in 2018 (register and booklet) and 2019 (code of ethics), and two of the three were not published online, while 87% of respondents in the national study were unaware the booklet exists.



ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE FROM MONTENEGRO

The International Volunteer Day 5th December has been celebrated annually for more than 20 years and provides the framework to present the National Annual Volunteering Awards in different categories. These awards recognise the contribution of individual volunteers, volunteer clubs, organisations, companies, and institutions that actively support and promote volunteering and active citizenship in Montenegro.

READ MORE ON THE
EUROPEAN YOUTH CARD:



ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: EUROPEAN YOUTH CARD FOR EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS PARTICIPANTS

Taking part in the European Solidarity Corps grants participants a free European Youth Card.

5. Future Challenges and Opportunities

The preceding sections in this Discussion Paper have highlighted some of the areas in relation to improved recognition of youth volunteering that need the attention of *youth organisations, National Agencies, Policymakers at different levels and European institutions*. **What can be done, and who potentially needs to do what, is the focus of this concluding section.**



In order to achieve a more comprehensive vision on this aspect it is important to keep in mind differences and similarities between for example: full time and part time volunteering opportunities; online and offline volunteering; rural & urban realities and formal and informal volunteering.

5.1. Self-Recognition

Young people have the potential to be engaged as volunteers together with peers to combat prejudice and advocate for equality, fairness and inclusion. Aside from schemes and policies that can deliver direct actions in this field, volunteering itself also has the power to bring people together who typically would not interact in their

general work, home and/ or family life. Whether the volunteering connects directly or indirectly with people in terms of the mission delivery, volunteering itself rarely engages people as isolated individuals. It has the power to facilitate communication, understanding and discovery of shared beliefs amongst young people and across different age groups including in situations of initial indifference, division and/ or distrust.

When young people volunteer they are making an active choice for change, defending the rights of others directly or indirectly, be that in communities, themselves, or more widely in society. For the organisers of youth volunteering opportunities it is interesting to hear what youth volunteers share with peers, family, work colleagues, counsellors and social workers etc following their experience and in which of the three categories of volunteer (Caring/nurturing ; Adventurous/life saving; Self realisation/ maturing/growing up & gaining independence/ empowerment) they primarily place themselves before, during and after the experience. Furthermore, to reflect on whether this resonates with the intended/ desired outcome.

It is clear that many young people make a lifestyle choice to volunteer and to therefore become active citizens rather than passive consumers in an increasingly complex, polarised and challenging world. However, **more needs to be done to achieve a wider understanding and recognition of volunteering as being something more than task delivery or a learning experience.** This is connected to how the media communicates about volunteering, how volunteering is talked about and addressed in formal education and how the organisers of youth volunteering refer to it themselves. Furthermore, **blurred lines between volunteers, traineeships and paid staff can be frequently encountered, leading to confused and uncertain recognition of youth volunteering.**



EXPLORING FURTHER



What can be done so that young people are more comfortable and proud to recognise their volunteer experience in at least the same way as a trainee one?



How can it be well communicated that volunteer roles are not replacing paid jobs, directly compensating for reductions in public services, and how the volunteers are different from employees in the same entity?



What role do formal and informal self-reflection exercises play when it comes to the recognition of youth volunteering experiences within the family, between peers and in the community?



What role do the perceptions, familiarity and rates of different types of volunteers (Caring/nurturing; Adventurous/life saving; Self-realisation/maturing/growing up & gaining independence/empowerment) play when it comes to self recognition of volunteering?

5.2. Recognition of different volunteering models

Employee volunteering (EV): EV is a model that provides inclusive skills development pathways that can particularly benefit young employees and early-career professionals, in line with EU youth and skills policy priorities. Quality employee volunteering schemes that may be typically embedded in company HR or ESG/CSR strategies have a particularly positive impact on entry level and youth staff recruitment, engagement, and retention. This supports employer competitiveness and workforce resilience. Research shows that employee volunteering is an important part of socialising young employees and early-career professionals into the workforce (Roza, 2016). When engaging young employee volunteers with emerging careers, the employee volunteering model can create synergies across volunteering, education, training and offers a strong potential impact on vocational training and non-formal and informal learning for young people. As with other forms of youth volunteering, EV can support young people who are at increased risk of poor mental and physical health such as those in early careers or experiencing career milestones (promotion or job change for example).

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE FROM ALLIANZ

Allianz in Spain has a well-established, high-quality employee volunteering programme, with a staff participation rate of 75%, to which entry-level and young employees are introduced from their earliest days in the company. Corporate volunteering is a quintessential part of the company's culture, and it's regarded as a key mechanism for integrating young employees. The onboarding process for new young joiners includes a volunteer activity, and they have multiple

opportunities throughout the year to volunteer, both individually and as part of a team, across a wide range of activities and causes. Allianz also organises a dedicated volunteering activity for its interns, intentionally embedding them in its corporate social responsibility values from early on.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- What can be done to increase access to EV opportunities across different sectors and fields?



- What features should EV schemes have in order to meet the needs of young people and society?



- How can the benefits of EV be ensured for young people who are experiencing increasingly precarious lifestyles whether through choice (well-qualified individuals can be highly mobile moving from place to place engaging in the most advantageous job opportunities) or as a result of poor quality and short-term employment in the gig economy and other sectors such as agriculture or tourism?

Population Preparedness: In moments of crisis young people make up a high proportion of those offering their time and energy to contribute to immediate response, recovery and to post-crisis follow up. There is a disconnect however between this willingness on the part of young people to act, and the investment in advance planning and foresight in terms of training, safeguarding and coordination needs of young volunteers.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- In what ways (for example targeted training, investment, legal provisions etc) can a “whole of society approach” for preparedness and resilience, as advocated for by the European Commission, take into account the specific characteristics of youth volunteering?



- How can it be ensured that the aspect of preparedness and resilience being currently addressed through the Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas strand of the European Solidarity Corps is only a starting point for addressing this in youth volunteering?

Democratic Resilience: Youth volunteering is part of the democratic infrastructure that provides the networks and spaces through which young people connect, participate, and uphold democratic values. How volunteering is included or not in the current and upcoming EU policy narratives on this topic is extremely critical to the way youth volunteering is going to be recognised going forward. Recognition of young volunteers as not just a source of people-power for essential and meaningful tasks in society but as having an important role in connecting people and communities, building trust and inclusion is essential. For youth volunteering to thrive, and meet its full potential, a strategic policy framework that empowers and mobilises young volunteers contributing to ensuring that the fundamental rights enshrined in the European Treaties are a reality is needed.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- What steps are needed to ensure that youth volunteering is better recognised as a civic force strengthening democratic resilience?



- What are the extra efforts that need to be made to highlight volunteers as actors who build trust and strengthen the resilience of communities, having a critical role in countering disinformation and polarisation as an important line of defence for democracy?

Closed Community Causes: Some youth volunteering projects take place in closed communities and situations with little or no external impact for the general, wider community and society.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- In what way do these kinds of projects contribute to the recognition of volunteering as having an importance for democracy and inclusion beyond tasks and short term achievements for personal benefits?

Online/e-volunteering: Currently online volunteering lacks comprehensive recognition as being a valuable format for volunteering in its own right and worthy of investment. For young people engaging in this kind of volunteering, there is inadequate protection for those involved. This stems from the legal gap concerning e-volunteering. Existing frameworks for youth volunteering do not sufficiently address the unique challenges of digital volunteering, leaving young e-volunteers and the organisations and initiatives where they are active unprotected. Furthermore, online volunteering for young people is often presented as a cheaper alternative as compared with face-to-face volunteering. In reality, **the investment needed to ensure safe, secure and impactful online volunteering opportunities for young people is at least the same as for face-to-face volunteering.** Attitudes in the younger generations towards online engagement are changing and whilst Generation Alpha have grown up in a fully digital world, greater parental awareness of the dangers of online and screen-based activities from a young age for child development may lead to different habits for Generation Beta. It is doubtful however that the online sphere will be rejected completely. When properly resourced and well managed, online volunteering can offer positive and life-affirming opportunities for young people's engagement enabling them to

address the societal challenges they see around them. This could be particularly useful and impactful in the field of **Citizen Science** for example.

READ MORE ON
CITIZEN SCIENCE:



EXPLORING FURTHER



What can be done to increase access to online and e-volunteering opportunities?



How could its potential be reinforced in the EU youth programme and possible other schemes at different levels?



Is there scope for the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges for professional development offer to be extended to include capacity building for youth and volunteering organisations to run e-volunteering initiatives?



How could the existing accreditation frameworks be extended by explicitly recognising e-volunteering in Quality Label definitions and defining standards and be integrated into the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) Quality Label?



Should there be specific Calls within the European Solidarity Corps for online or blended volunteering projects that combine online and face to face opportunities and what would be the quality criteria?

Service Learning: Attention is increasing on the need for better and more targeted civic education for young people in Europe. Service Learning (integrating community service with formal education) whilst not considered volunteering itself, serves as a pathway to volunteering. Good quality Service Learning programmes in primary, secondary and tertiary education establishments, with a strong volunteering component as part of Civic Education programmes that protect the “free will” nature of volunteering as distinct from compulsory parts of formal education systems, can lead to increased recognition of youth volunteering.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- What do Service Learning programmes need to do to improve the potential contribution to better recognition of youth volunteering?

Voluntourism: For an increasing number of young people and their families, schools and universities provide connection to, and awareness of, voluntourism opportunities for young people. These generally involve paying a fee and have other associated costs to participate. The voluntourism model contributes to an increasing recognition of volunteering as a leisure activity. Furthermore, in many regards, an exclusive leisure activity that is only available to those with sufficient financial means to participate.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- In what ways can better information about this model and evidence-based advice on how to make empowered decisions about volunteering under this model be provided in Europe contributing to increased recognition of good quality volunteering?



- In what ways can the European Solidarity Corps Volunteering Teams format serve as a more accessible alternative to voluntourism opportunities? How can these opportunities be further improved?

5.3. Legal status and the role of the state

Insurance & Status: In research undertaken for the 2020 [Study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities](#) published in connection with the 2022 Council Recommendation on Mobility of Young Volunteers, nearly one third of survey respondents indicated that it is a very **relevant or relevant obstacle that young people lose their national health insurance if they leave for a long-term volunteering placement abroad**. Almost half (44%) said that young people receiving state welfare payments (unemployment benefits, disability pay, etc.), might lose them if they become volunteers.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- In what ways would recognising cross-border youth volunteers with a European Volunteering Status improve access to youth volunteering? How can it be achieved?



- What hinders the implementation at the EU member state level of the Council Recommendation on cross-border volunteering, especially ensuring that engaging in a long-term placement abroad will not lead to the loss of any welfare/ personal care/ unemployment or health care support?

Cross Sector Collaboration Frameworks: How formal education systems incorporate components of Civic Education and Service Learning in their curricula are crucial determinants of recognition of youth volunteering. The European Democracy Shield is seeking to boost these aspects of state education systems as a route to strengthening democracy and democratic participation, including youth volunteering. How validation of learning opportunities are addressed in this context, and whether they meet the standards in European guidance and go beyond certifying hours committed and focus on learning outcomes, also has high consequences for how volunteering is recognised and how its meaning and value is understood. Beyond formal education, Governments also need to work with other stakeholders in different sectors and fields to ensure that systems are in place for youth volunteering to thrive and be widely recognised and properly understood.



EXPLORING FURTHER



What are the steps that need to be taken to increase the numbers of young people experiencing pathways to volunteering through Service Learning and other Civic Education opportunities?



Which are the most important stakeholders that Governments need to work with and what should be the priority actions to be undertaken together to ensure that the recognition and impact of youth volunteering can reach its full potential?

Impact Measurement: Whilst regular research is undertaken within the European Solidarity Corps context within the [RAY Monitoring project RAY-SOC](#) across Europe, there is a **lack of investment in research and data collection around youth volunteering and volunteering**. This is the case on a general level but is even more critical on the question of diverse and emerging forms of engagement and participation. Underinvestment sends a signal that public authorities do not sufficiently recognise youth volunteering as an important component in society. The lack of data, and lack of visibility for the limited existing data, also contributes to lack of recognition as the evidence around who is volunteering, why they do it, what their ages are and what their impact is, is not readily available. To reach higher recognition of youth volunteer-

ing, more needs to be understood and known about the impact of a wider range of young volunteers than is currently the case. This is **particularly important concerning increased awareness of, and knowledge about, the trend towards more young people choosing to engage in informal volunteering**. This trend is at odds with the main structures and formats of publicly funded and supported youth volunteer programmes. The European Solidarity Corps “Solidarity Projects” are a notable exception in this case but there are also a growing number of “seed funding” initiatives that are also going in the same direction (Poland for example).

Despite the importance of motivation as a determining factor of the impacts of volunteers in the civic space, there is a notable lack of comparative and pan-European research in this area. The [Volunteer Functions Inventory \(VFI\)](#) can be used to better understand the role of individual motivations of young formal and informal volunteers and how these motivations can inform both further research and practice. The VFI distinguishes between two dimensions of motivation:

- the explicit reasons volunteers give for their activities;
- the deeper, value-based psychological drivers that influence their propensity to volunteer.



EXPLORING FURTHER



What can stakeholders do to better measure the impact of volunteering that would contribute to a broader and wider understanding of youth volunteering, leading to greater recognition?



How can research outcomes be better communicated for enhancing recognition?

5.4. Societal recognition

Community Resilience: Youth volunteering lacks full recognition as a key resource for community resilience and a driver of value creation that is crucial for sustainable development as well as personal and community well-being. This includes issues such as loneliness and the mental health crisis that negatively impact communities across Europe. The collaboration of young people as volunteers with other stakeholders

enables a “whole of society approach”, facing threats together, and contributes to common, sustainable solutions to existing and future challenges, including disaster preparedness and risk reduction. However, if youth volunteering in the context of preparedness and resilience is limited to crisis response and recovery in the most obvious senses of earthquakes, floods and wildfires for example then the full potential will not be reached. Additional measures addressing youth volunteering in the field of preparedness and resilience that is aimed at addressing threats to democracy coming from fake news, disinformation and other destabilising forces also need to be taken into account. In an increasingly polarised society, such as on the basis of gender, age, socio-economic context and political views, volunteering has a key role to play in the implementation of initiatives that can enable young people to be proactive in countering these threats. This can be particularly powerful and impactful in addressing the need to increase critical thinking and media literacy skills. The EU Preparedness Union Strategy should take into account the essential roles of young volunteers, acknowledging and supporting their distinctive capacity to address vulnerabilities at community level, including before crises emerge. The increased attention that can be foreseen on volunteering including youth volunteering in this way for preparedness and resilience can be welcomed.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- What steps need to be taken for youth volunteering to achieve fuller recognition of its role in community cohesion, resilience and reducing polarisation?

Care needs to be taken however concerning how initiatives that can be considered as “preparing for war” or contributing to war and conflict are treated in this narrative as this can put at risk the components of solidarity and peace as the basis for volunteering.

Underpinning Physical and Mental Health: Evidence shows that volunteering has a positive impact on mental health indicators for young people. The Spanish Volunteering Observatory is currently undertaking a study to better understand this phenomenon specifically for young people. The impact of volunteering on well-being & quality of life for young volunteers and their beneficiaries should not be underestimated. Volunteering needs to be fully recognised for its added value in this respect. Youth volunteering creates social capital that goes far beyond the economic value that is the basis of some volunteering value indicators.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- What measures need to be in place to go beyond the recognition of youth volunteering as a leisure activity, a “nice to have” and achieve fuller recognition of its role in improving the health and well being of young people?

Images and Symbolism: Many volunteer organisations and initiatives use images of hands and hearts in their volunteering communication. It should be considered however that this symbolism serves to feed the narrative of youth volunteering as a task delivery phenomenon based on foundations of charity with a lack of mutual reciprocity and shared solidarity of purpose and objectives.



EXPLORING FURTHER



- Going forward, for youth volunteering in Europe, what are the images & messages that need to be used that have the best chance of leading to the actions that will reach the sought recognition from different stakeholders such as: employers; civil society organisations; young people and their families; career guidance counsellors; teachers; social workers; youth workers; Governments and other policymakers?

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