

EU Youth Programmes Unpacked

How Erasmus+ and
European Solidarity Corps
Enable Youth Civic Space



Acknowledgments

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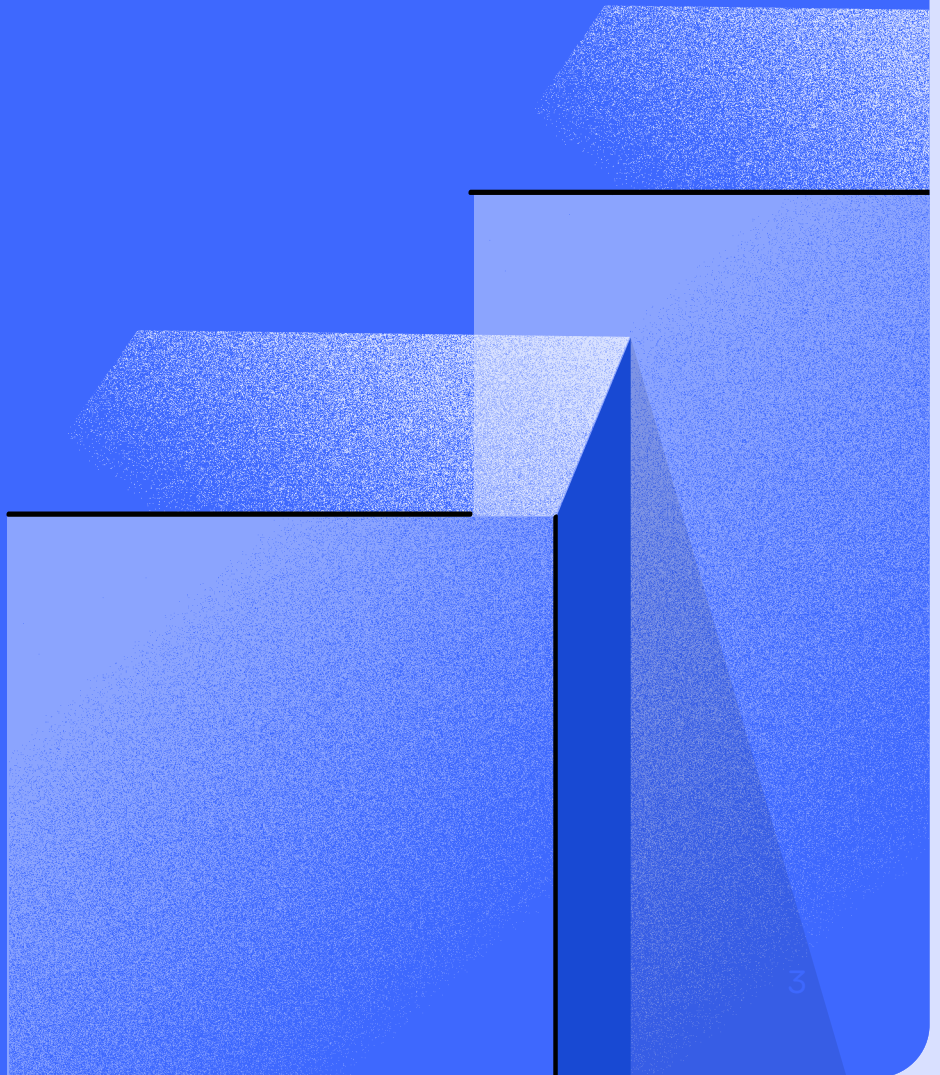


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01

Background and introduction

The current review of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework is an opportunity to better grasp what aspects of the programme are functioning adequately and should be kept, and what other elements are not performing as they were expected to and should be either adapted or discontinued.

The European Commission (n.d) framework for evaluation of programmes lays on five principles: namely effectiveness (whether the EU action reached its objectives), efficiency (what are the costs and benefits), relevance (whether it responds to stakeholders' needs), coherence (how well it works with other actions) and EU added value (what are the benefits of acting at EU level). Whereas those principles allow for the evaluation to dig deep on multiple aspects in relation to the implementation of the programme, they fail to identify and address the needs specific to youth organisations and youth civil society.

That gains a particularly relevant light for a programme that is characterised for serving as one of the main supports and pillars of not just the youth sector in Europe, but also the education and sports sectors. As the European Commission evaluation stands, there is a clear need for evidence-based reports and research concerning the functioning and the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme from the perspective of youth organisations and youth civil society, and this report has the goal of filling that gap.

In that sense, these are the aims and objectives foreseen for this report:

Aim:

Map the ways in which youth organisations and youth civil society organisations experience the EU Youth Programmes - namely the Erasmus+ youth chapter and the European Solidarity Corps - in the framework of the evaluation of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework beyond the rather narrow schemes and indicators used by the European Commission for the mid-term review process.

Objectives:

- Provide a youth perspective to the current conversations around the mid-term evaluation of EU funding programmes - and upcoming negotiations on their successor programmes - with data and research representative of youth organisations and youth civil society.
- Understand how well adapted the EU Youth Programmes are to the needs of young people and structural realities of youth civil society and youth organisations, and the ways in which other EU programmes are addressing young people's involvement in civil society within their scope.
- Outline the opportunities and challenges stemming from the current implementation of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes in terms of their contribution to youth-led organisations and to thriving youth civic spaces.

The research was commissioned by the European Youth Forum and undertaken by People Dialogue and Change.

The EU Youth Programmes, democracy, and the civic space for young people

It is clear that the EU Youth Programmes are intended as an instrument to promote young people's engagement with European democracies and that young people engagement with civil society and civic space is a key part of this. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, as the overarching youth policy document on the level of the EU, states clearly that its objectives are to foster 'youth participation in democratic life' as well as 'social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society' (European Union 2018).

Protecting and effectively guaranteeing a vibrant and open civic space for young people is a crucial component of a stable and flourishing democracy (Deželan et al. 2000.). Civil society plays a central role in the associational life of young people who are their members. Through membership of young people, civil society supports young people's participation in democratic and civic life and enables their access to human rights such as the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of association. Civil society organisations provide a platform for dialogue between a diversity of voices and the free exchange of information between civil society actors and various other stakeholders (ibid), and therefore also provide a vital platform through which young people can engage in public debate and democratic participation.

Moreover, two of the specific objectives of The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 relate to the domain of strengthening of the civil society:

'Enable young people to be architects of their own lives, support their personal development and growth to autonomy, build their resilience and equip them with life skills to cope with a changing world,

Encourage and equip young people with the necessary resources to become active citizens, agents of solidarity and positive change inspired by EU values and a European identity' (ibid).

One of the guiding principles of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, is also (youth) participation. This is described within the strategy as follows: '*recognising that all young people are a resource to society, all policies and activities concerning young people should uphold young people's right to participate in the development, implementation and follow-up of policies affecting them by means of **meaningful participation of young people and youth organisations***' (authors' emphasis). The European Youth Goals (n.d.), which have become an integral part of the EU Youth Strategy, repeatedly mention support for the youth civil society in various domains. Most notably, The European Youth Goal no.11 '*Youth Organisations and European Programmes*' speaks about support for youth organisations in various domains. Youth Goal no. 1 '*Connecting the EU with Youth*', also refers to increasing the budget and impact of the EU Youth Programmes.

The Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 explicitly speaks about democratic participation of young people as well. The Programme objectives are as follows (European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2021: Article 3; emphasis added by authors): *'The general objective of the Programme is to support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in the fields of education and training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and **social cohesion, to driving innovation and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship.***' Even though civil society is not explicitly mentioned, it is apparent that support for civic spaces in the youth field is indeed encompassed within the general objective of the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027. This is further strengthened by the specific objective which aims at promotion of *'non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people, and cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and **innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of youth***' (European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2021: Article 3; emphasis added by authors).

Similar direction can be seen in the case of the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027, as its establishing Regulation defines the general objective as follows: *'to promote solidarity as a value, mainly through volunteering, **enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities as a means to contribute to strengthening cohesion, solidarity, democracy and citizenship in Europe, while also responding to societal challenges and strengthening communities, with particular effort to promote social inclusion. It shall also contribute to European cooperation that is relevant to young people.***' (European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2018: Article 3; emphasis added by authors) The emphasis on civil society and supporting young people in taking up active roles within civil society and local communities is apparent.

Alongside this, The Youth Participation Strategy (SALTO PI n.d.) is dedicated to supporting Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes in achieving one of the key objectives of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, namely in *'fostering of youth participation in democratic life'* (SALTO PI n.d.: 28). Youth organisations as well as (national) youth

councils are named among the key stakeholders of the participation strategy, and youth sector development is underlined in order to keep on *'creating and protecting civic space for young people'* (ibid: 36).

All of the aforementioned general and specific objectives as well as the key guiding principles aim at strengthening young people's engagement in public matters at large, in communities and in civil society as a key part of democracy. At the level of the EU Youth Strategy and its implementation tools it is clear that civil society, and civic spaces are an important topic of youth policy, youth programmes, and supporting mechanisms. Civic spaces, participation, dialogue, participation in community and public matters, are the key domains which are repeatedly mentioned and create a backbone of all strategic documents at the EU level. Therefore, as a result of these policies, the EU and member states have a responsibility towards young people to provide them with opportunities to promote their participation and active citizenship, and one of the most instrumental means of doing so is supporting self-organised youth civil society, meaningful participation mechanisms and the co-creation of youth policies.

The work of the RAY network has identified the Erasmus+ youth chapter overall as having a clear impact on both young people, and youth workers' understanding of, and engagement with youth civil society as well as their overall participation in democratic life (Herranz et al 2024). Over half (53.9%) of participants in Erasmus + youth chapter projects are more likely to engage with civil society after the project, and 90% of participants agree or strongly agree they are better able to actively engage in civil society after the projects (ibid). It is clear the EU Youth Programmes as a whole, are effective at enabling and encouraging young people's participation in civil society. However, the extent to which the programmes are effective at supporting youth organisations and youth civil society themselves is less well understood. A healthy civil society requires both active citizens, and functioning structures, organisations, and spaces through which they can be active. It is essential then to explore the extent to which the EU Youth Programmes are effective at supporting youth civic spaces, and specifically youth organisation and youth civil society.

What is meant by youth organisations and youth civil society?

When considering the extent to which the EU Youth Programmes support youth involvement with the civic space, clarity on key terminology is essential. Both to underpin the methodology of the paper, and more importantly, to advance the debate regarding the EU Youth Programmes role in the youth civic space.

The European Youth Forum defines youth organisations as organisations which are not for profit and democratically led by young people. This recognises that democratic representation and leadership by young people are a fundamental part of these organisations and supports young people's right to freedom of assembly and association as defined by the European Convention on Human Rights. Similarly, The Council of Europe (2024) considers all youth organisations, by definition, to be youth-led: *'Youth organisations are generally understood to be youth-led, non-profit, voluntary, and participatory non-governmental associations.'*

Unless otherwise stated, reference to 'youth organisation' within this research should be understood to follow this definition. The term 'youth civil society' is also used to refer to organisations other than private or public organisations whose exclusive focus is young people. This includes youth organisations but may also include other civil society organisations focused exclusively on young people but without structures in place to be democratically led by young people. Examples of this might be a youth worker led civil society organisation. It can also be understood that young people might engage with other civil society organisations (such as environmental organisations) which do not have an exclusive focus on youth.

However, within the EU Youth Programmes, there is a lack of definition of some of these key terms. The term 'youth organisation' has been used in official documents of the EU such as the Regulation 2021/817 establishing the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 (European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2021) or even the official glossary of terms related to the Erasmus+ Programme (European Commission 2024), however, it is not defined in these key documents. The only definition that can be found is located in a footnote of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide (2023: 218) which stipulates that youth organisation is *'any organisation, public or private, working with or for young people outside formal settings. Such organisations can be, for example: a nonprofit organisation, association, NGO (including European Youth NGOs); a national Youth Council; a public authority at local, regional or national level; an education or research institution; or a foundation.'* This definition directly contrasts the European Youth Forum and Council of Europe definition of youth organisation, in that it encompasses organisations outside of the civic space, and organisations which are not youth-led. It also contrasts the definition used within the latest call for proposals of the DEAR Programme of the European Commission that *'Youth organisations are generally understood to be youth-led, non-profit, voluntary non-governmental associations, and under some circumstances, can instead be part of the state apparatus or be youth worker-led'* (European Commission 2022).

Issues also arise when defining 'youth-led organisations' within the EU Youth Programmes. While the term is used in official EU documents (Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024), no official definition is provided as to what extent young people need to be engaged, and in which roles, for the organisation to become 'youth-led' (Motamed-Afshari, Fras 2022).

'Youth sector' is a term used also in official documents related to the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 (Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024, European Commission 2024b), as well as a similar term 'field of youth' or 'youth field' (European Commission 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2023), however, no official definition of these terms is provided. The Council of Europe (2024) defines the youth sector as follows: *'The youth sector refers to the areas in which youth activities are performed... Youth sector activity is organised by young people or youth policy actors, undertaken with the aim of improving the position of young people and their empowerment for active participation for their own and for the benefit of the society. The youth sector is comprised of a diverse range of government institutions, non-government organisations, agencies, private practitioners, volunteers, programs, services and other actors that work with young people or have been established to benefit young people.'* Broadly speaking, any activities for, with, and by young people should be considered as constituting the youth sector, field of youth, or youth field. The European Youth Forum and this research uses the term youth sector in line with the Council of Europe definition.

Defining these terms is essential for a proper exploration of the extent to which the EU Youth Programmes support young people's involvement in the civic space, and democracy as a whole. The EU Youth Programmes are, in general, accessible to a wide range of bodies, including youth organisations, civil society organisations, civil society organisations, public bodies, formal educational institutions and others. Whilst any organisation successful in receiving funding through the programmes might reasonably be considered part of the youth sector as defined

above, it is not the case that all of these beneficiary organisations are within the civic space or part of civil society. And, whilst the programmes generally encourage the participation of young people in application development, it is not a criterion for all beneficiary organisations to be democratically youth-led. The type of organisation receiving a programme grants, is therefore a key factor in the extent to which a grant is supporting young people's engagement in the civic space.

Furthermore, the extent to which youth organisation and youth civil society organisation are able to effectively engage with and utilise the EU Youth Programmes, both as beneficiaries and stakeholders also becomes a key question when considering how effective the programmes are at supporting the youth civic space and young people's democratic participation. Other research such as the European Commission evaluations of the programmes and the activities of the RAY network is vital, but generally does not distinguish between types of organisations within the youth sector when conducting analysis. This research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme specifically in relation to youth organisations and youth civil society.



02

Methodology

The methodology for this research is based on four elements. A desktop review of relevant literature on the EU Youth Programmes, an analysis of the grants awarded based on the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps results platforms, a survey of youth organisations as well as focus groups and key informant interviews with staff or volunteers within youth organisations. Details of the survey, interviews and focus groups are below. Details of the grants analysis are in chapter three.

Survey method

An original survey was designed and used as an online data collection tool between June and August 2024. The explicit target audience of the survey was youth organisations and youth civil society, including International Non-governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs) and National Youth Councils. Respondents were asked to reply on behalf of their organisation rather than as an individual, to ensure responses represented their organisation's experience. Targeted snowball sampling was used to provide a wide representation of responses from different types of organisations across Europe. The survey was distributed by the European Youth Forum, who worked closely with its member organisation to enable them to distribute it to their own members (i.e. local and regional youth organisations). To support this, alongside English, the survey was made available in Czech, German, Danish, Spanish, and Romanian with targeted distribution undertaken in Ireland, The Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Denmark and Romania and Moldova. These countries were selected to provide a representation of the economic, geographic and youth work realities across Europe.

Target group	Sample % (n)
German organisations	16.4% (12)
Czech organisations	9.6% (7)
Moldovan organisations	9.6% (7)
Danish organisations	5.5% (4)
Spanish organisations	5.5% (4)
Irish organisations	4.1% (3)
Romanian organisations	2.7% (2)
Organisations based in other countries	16.4 (12)
INGYOs	36.1% (22)
Total valid responses	100% (73)

All in all, 75 closed and open-ended questions were used to enable representatives of these organisations to give their opinions on implementation of the Erasmus+ youth chapter actions and European Solidarity Corps Programmes. In total, the survey collected 92 valid answers from representatives of youth organisations and youth civil society organisations across Europe. Data cleaning left 73 valid answers, with respondents with more than 30% of missing answers being filtered out. All subsequent analyses are based on the 73 valid answers.

Most of the organisations that responded to the survey have experience with successful Erasmus+ KA1 youth mobility applications (68%) and with successful European Solidarity Corps applications (57%). KA1 youth workers' mobilities under Erasmus+ Programme as well as KA2 Cooperation Partnerships are also domains in which the surveyed organisations have some experience of success (58% and 53% respectively). The least experience can be seen in the cases of KA1 virtual exchanges (only 11%) and of the KA1 DiscoverEU Inclusion Action (only 4%). Virtual exchanges are the least favourite exchange type among young people (Bárta 2022: 37), and low experience with DiscoverEU among the surveyed organisations is likely due to the nature of this particular project type: individual mobility of youth across Europe with none or minimal support from any organisation.

A wide diversity of organisations replied to the survey showing that opinions of diverse actors with different needs are included.

64% of survey respondents came from national, regional or local organisations (i.e., those based in and operating mostly within a certain country), and 36% came from INGYOs.

44% of the surveyed organisations reported focusing on working internationally, 31% focus on the national level, and 25% focus work regionally or locally.

A vast majority of the surveyed organisations were small entities with up to 10 employees (71%). 35% of organisations had 1-3 paid members of staff, 36% of organisations had 4-10 paid members of staff, and 29% of organisations had 11 or more paid members of staff.

40% of organisations had between 1 and 10 volunteers, 31% had 11-50 volunteers and 29% had 51 or more volunteers.

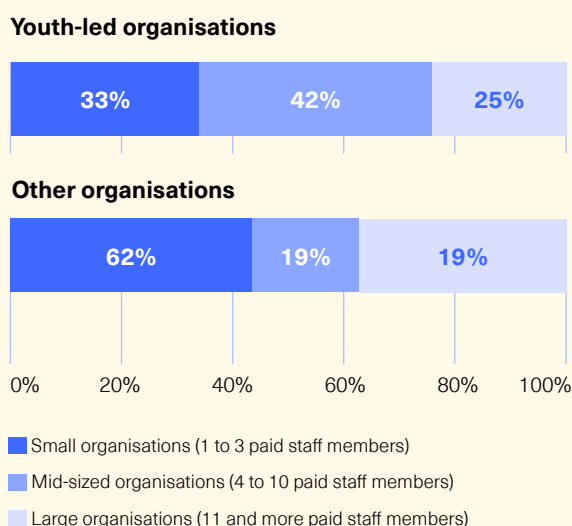
71% of the organisations that contributed to the survey were youth-led with the remaining 29% being youth civil society organisations who did not describe themselves as youth-led.

A key characteristic of the sample was that youth-led organisations were working with volunteers much more than other organisations (Graph 2.1a). While two thirds of other organisations work with up to ten volunteers, two thirds of youth-led organisations work with more than 11 volunteers, and one third of them engage 51 or more volunteers. Youth-led organisations were also smaller in terms of numbers of employees, with only 25% of them having 11 or more paid staff members, in comparison to 38% in other organisations (Graph 2.1b). This can suggest that such organisations have different needs when it comes to project management and implementation.

Graph 2.1a: Amount of volunteers in youth-led organisations



Graph 2.1b: Amount of employees in youth-led organisations



Focus group method

Two focus groups were held in June 2024 with representatives of member organisations of the European Youth Forum, split into two groups: INGYO, and INGYO or national/local organisations specifically working with young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO). Organisations were invited to participate through an open call among the European Youth Forum membership.

A total of 36 young people (25 participants in the INGYO group, and 11 in the YPFO group) took part in focus groups. Focus groups were held online for 90 minutes each. Questions for the focus groups focused on experiences with granting formats, governance of EU Youth Programmes, support for capacity building, and for the YPFO focus group in particular, structural barriers faced by these young people when participating in the EU Youth Programmes. Responses were recorded on virtual sticky notes in a Jamboard, as well as through a video recording and transcript of the session.

In addition, semi-structured key stakeholder interviews were conducted with representatives of National Youth Councils (Denmark, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Moldova, Slovenia, and Spain). These NYCs were chosen to link as closely as possible to the target countries within the survey. Interviews were held online for 45 minutes and explored the awareness of the EU Youth Programmes among their member organisations, experiences with applying for and receiving EU Youth Programme funding in their specific country contexts, and the role and support of National Agencies. Additionally, questions relating to youth organisations supporting young people with fewer opportunities and their experiences with EU Youth Programme funding were asked. Responses were recorded through a video recording and transcript of the session. Interviews were further contextualised and triangulated with qualitative data supplied by the European Youth Forum on member engagement with grant makers.

03

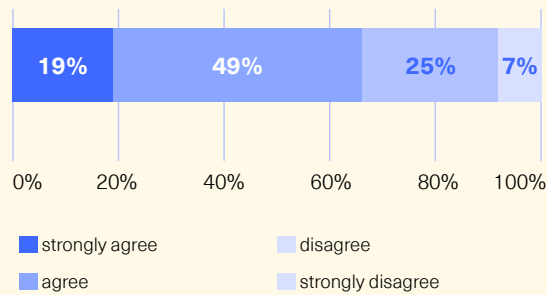
To what extent are grants from the EU Youth Programmes awarded to youth organisations and youth-related civil society organisations?

Erasmus + youth chapter actions and European Solidarity Corps grant can be applied for by coordinating entities with a range of different organisational statuses, including public entities, civil society organisations, schools, social enterprises, youth organisations and even informal groups of young people active in youth work. As discussed in chapter 1, organisational definitions are underdeveloped within the supporting legislation. This lack of definition is reflected in categorisation within the Erasmus+¹ and European Solidarity Corps² projects results platforms which is the main publicly accessible source of data on the grants awarded. On these platforms, a wide range of categories for coordinating entities can be seen, many of which are overlapping or unclearly defined. Nevertheless, the breadth of organisations accessing the EU Youth Programmes is immediately evident from the list of coordinating entities within these databases.

The European Parliament (2024: para 38) in its report on the implementation of Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 also notes lower success rates of youth field organisations in securing funding: *'[The European Parliament] regrets also the significantly fewer successful applications from youth and volunteer-led organisations for centralised grants, particularly in the European Youth Together, and Key Action 2 Cooperation Partnerships in the field of Youth, and the subsequent reduction in the latter's budget in 2023.'* highlighting also that *'the number of beneficiaries of centralised youth operating grants was reduced drastically, severely impacting an already COVID-weakened, volunteer-led youth civil society sector'* (ibid: para 37).

Within this research, only two thirds of the surveyed organisations believe that EU Youth Programmes are fully used for the benefit of young people or youth organisations (Graph 3.0a). This finding suggests that representatives of youth organisations believe that there are concerns about other actors who benefit from the EU Youth Programme funds.

Graph 3.0a: Level of agreement: The funds of the EU Youth Programmes are fully used for the benefit of young people or youth organisations



This is further backed up by concerns expressed within the interviews and focus groups:

“

'There's this issue around professional organisations applying for funding, who don't really work with young people. A lot of capacity is taken up with looking into applicants to make sure they are genuinely working with young people, that they are youth-centred, and that the funding is for young people. This takes up a lot of resources that could be better used by National Agencies'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

1 <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects>

2 <https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/projects/>

The limitation of data on the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps results platform database means that it is not possible to identify the number of grants awarded to youth-led organisations. However, an analysis can be conducted based on two groups of organisations, built upon the original categories within the two databases. These are:

Youth organisations

Organisations which are identified as 'youth organisations' on the databases. Though, it is not necessarily certain that these organisations are all youth-led, and so the category does not strictly meet the European Youth Forum or Council of Europe's definition of youth organisation.

Youth-related civil society organisations³

Organisation that can be clearly identified as being civil society organisations (i.e., not private or public entities) based upon their categorisation on the databases. As they are in receipt of EU Youth Programme grants, they have some focus on youth (i.e., they are youth-related). However, as they may not have an exclusive focus on youth, they may not necessarily be 'youth civil society organisations' in the strictest sense. The category of 'youth organisations' above is included within this category.

The remainder of this chapter presents this analysis⁴, with the final section reproducing a similar previously published analysis by the European Youth Forum on European Youth Together grants.

Erasmus+ KA1 and KA2 youth chapter grants

Erasmus+ KA1 youth chapter grants (hereafter just 'KA1') provide support for learning mobility projects for young people and youth workers. KA2 youth field grants (hereafter just 'KA2') provide support for partnership for cooperation and exchange of practices. In this sense KA1 grants can be regarded as better suited for project delivery, such as youth exchanges and training of youth workers. KA2 grants are larger and better suited to long term development of organisation and building of international partnership to enhance the capacity of the organisations involved.⁵

According to the analysis of the results database: overall the number of KA1 and KA2 grants made to any type of coordinating entity through youth chapter actions has been increasing year-on-year but there has been a change in the type of grants made. Analyses of KA1 and KA2 grants made in call years 2021 to 2023 show that in total, the number of grants awarded annually grew from 3325 to 5406. KA1 projects were responsible for this steep increase with KA2 projects showing only a small increase in numbers over the years (Graph 3.1a).

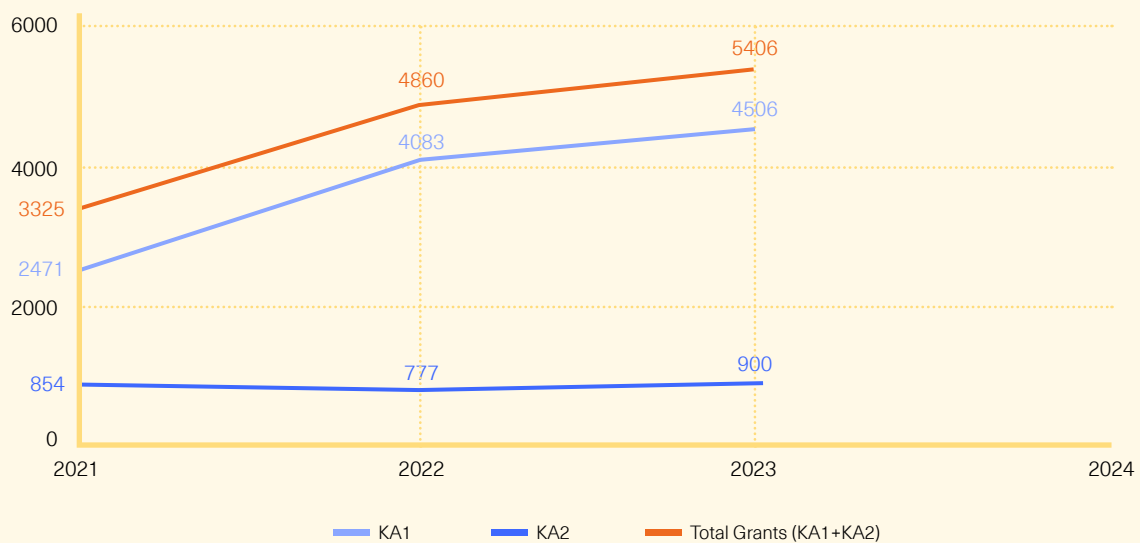
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- 3 This includes the following original categories of coordinating entities from the two databases: 'Youth organisations', 'National Youth Councils', 'Groups of young people active in youth work', 'Non-governmental organisations / associations / social enterprises', 'Civil society organisations', 'European NGOs'. Although it should be noted 'Groups of young people active in youth work' are not strictly an organisation in the formal legal sense
 - 4 Databases were accessed as of 09/10/2024. New project results are continuously added to the databases so attempts to reproduce findings may not lead to the same results. The call year 2024 was not complete at the time of writing so this year has not been analysed.
 - 5 KA3 youth field projects have not been included in the available database since 2021, so cannot be included in this analysis.

So, whilst the overall number of projects funded through Erasmus+ youth chapter actions has been increasing, there is a general shift away from KA2 grants and toward KA1 grants. In 2021, KA2 represented one quarter (25.6%) of grants made, by 2023 this had fallen to just over one in six grants (16.6%). KA1 is intended to support learning mobilities, whilst KA2 provides more support for longer term partnerships for co-operation and exchanges of practices. It can therefore be seen that Erasmus+ youth funding overall has moved away proportionally from more structural support and toward the funding of smaller projects and from emphasising organisational development to individual participants development.

An analysis of the coordination entities receiving grants reveals that not all KA1 and KA2 grants go to organisations which are operating within the youth civic space.

When grants made to these youth-related civil society organisations are considered, it can be seen that between three quarters to just over four fifths of KA1 and KA2 grants are awarded to these types of organisations each year (Graph 3.1c). Similar to the overall trend for all organisation types, a year on year increase can be seen in grant numbers. 2761 grants were awarded to youth-related civil society organisations in 2021, while 4241 were awarded in 2023. This increase is primarily as a result of increases in KA1 projects grants; the number of KA2 projects awarded to youth-related civil society organisations is relatively stagnant with some fluctuation (Graph 3.1b). However, when the number of grants made to youth-related civil society organisations is considered as a proportion of overall grants made through KA1 and KA2, a different set of patterns emerges.

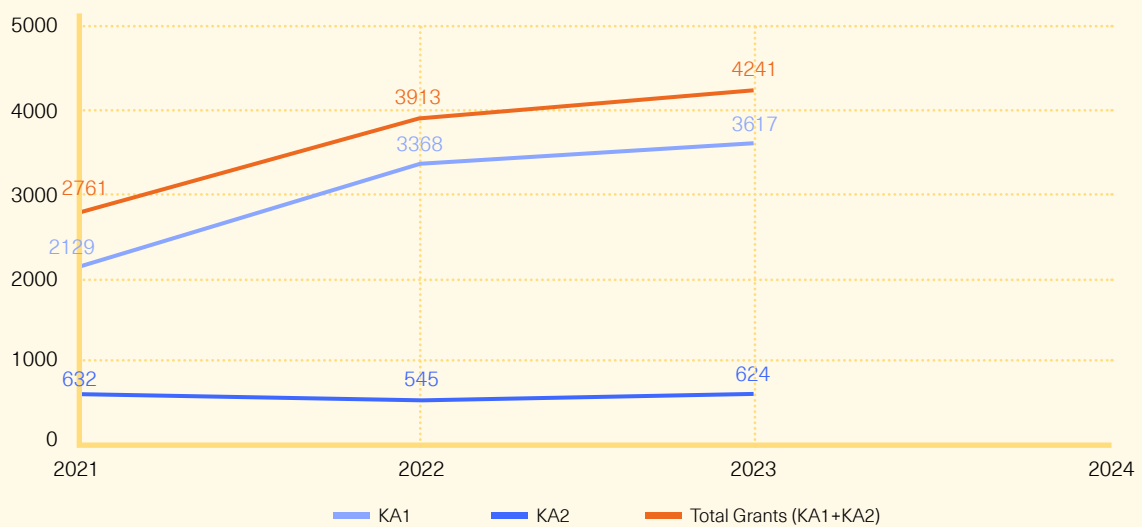
Graph 3.1a: Number of KA1 & KA2 youth field grants, by year (all organisation types)



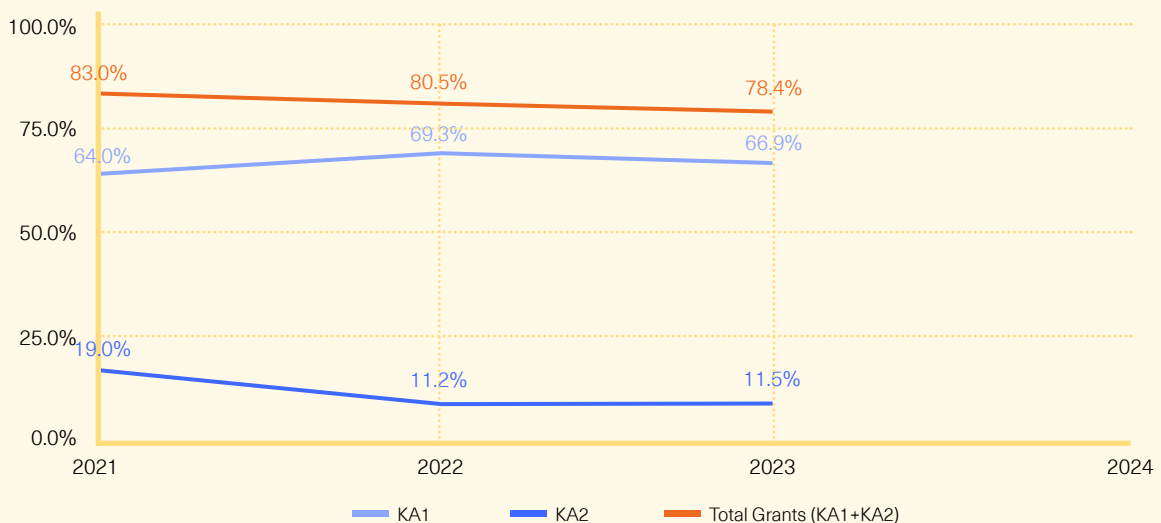
Firstly, it can be seen that *the proportion* of grants going to youth-related civil society organisations is declining year on year from 83.0% in 2021 to 78.4% in 2023. That is to say, whilst the overall number of KA1 and KA2 grants being awarded to any type of organisation is increasing each year, youth-related civil society organisations are not experiencing the same increases as organisations outside of the youth civic space. Youth-related civil society organisations have not received the benefit of the overall increase in grants at the same rate as other organisations have (Graph 3.1c).

Secondly, it can be seen that the generally stagnant number of KA2 grants made to youth-related civil society organisations means that this form of granting has decreased substantially when considered as a proportion of overall grants. In 2021 KA2 grants to youth-related civil society organisations made up just under 1 in 5 (19.0%) of all grants made to any type of entity, by 2023 this had fallen to just over 1 in 10 grants (11.5%) (Graph 3.1c).

Graph 3.1b: Number of KA1 & KA2 youth field grants to youth-related civil society organisations, by year



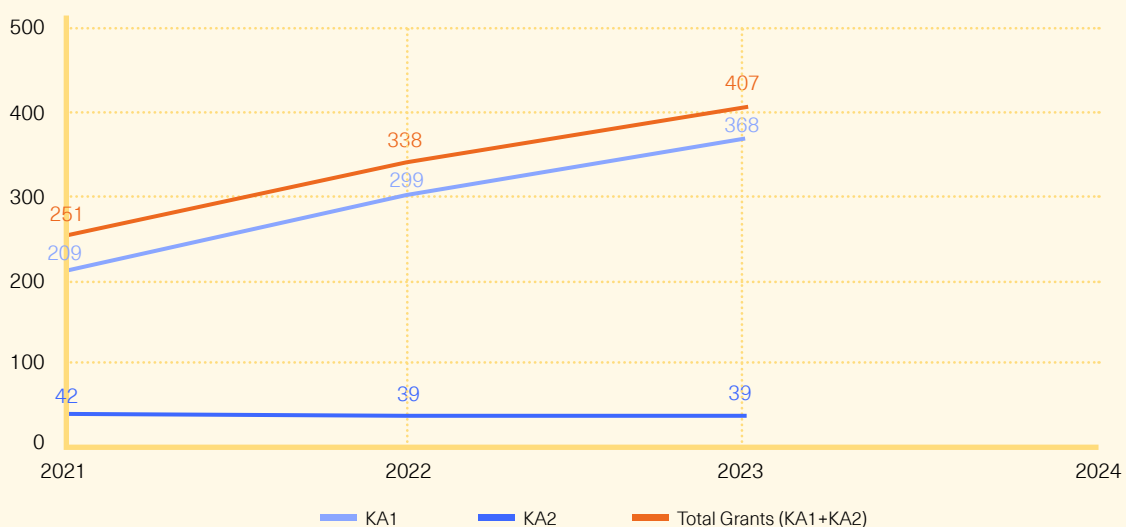
Graph 3.1c: KA1 & KA2 youth field grants to youth-related civil society organisations as a proportion of total KA1+KA2 grants made, by year



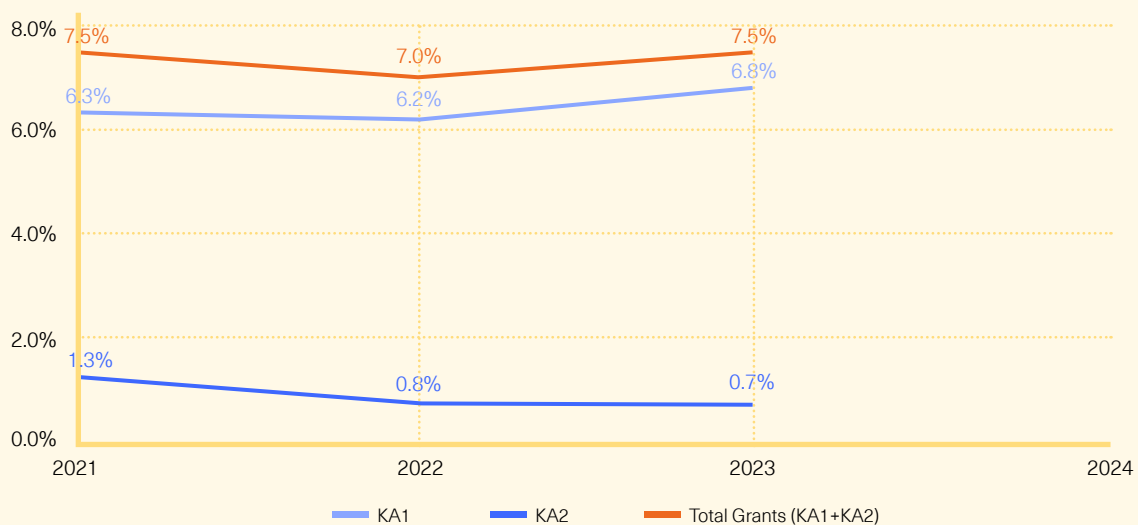
Considering just youth organisations, firstly it can be observed that the number of grants awarded to this group are relatively small. Roughly 250 and 400 grants are awarded to youth organisations each year (Graph 3.1d). Similar to the overall trend for all types of organisations, the number of grants made to youth organisations does increase year on year. Youth organisations receive between 7.0-7.5% of all KA1 and KA2 Grants per year. This proportion is relatively static, indicating that youth organisations have experienced a similar rate of increase to all organisation types (Graph 3.1e).

However, in the case of youth organisations the increase in grant numbers experienced is made up almost exclusively of KA1 grants; the absolute number of KA2 grants made to youth organisations has remained nearly static over the years (Graph 3.1d). As a result, when the number of KA2 grants made to youth organisations is considered as a proportion of overall grants to any organisation type, a decline is seen. In 2021, KA2 grants to youth organisations represented 1.3% of all grants to any organisation type; this had fallen by nearly half to 0.7% by 2023.

Graph 3.1d: Number of KA1 & KA2 youth field grants to youth organisations, by year



Graph 3.1e: KA1 & KA2 youth field grants to youth organisations as a proportion of total KA1+KA2 grants made, by year

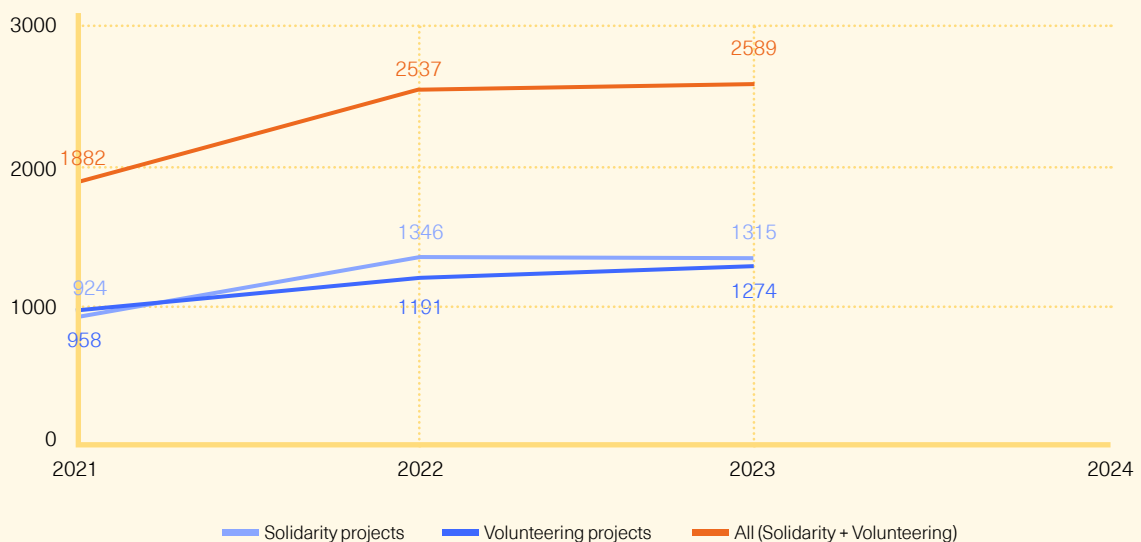


European Solidarity Corps grants

Similar analyses have also been conducted for the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027, in this case distinguishing between the Solidarity Projects and the Volunteering Projects⁶. Solidarity projects provide support for young people to address challenges and causes in their neighbourhood or that that matter to them. Volunteering projects provide support for organisations to host and support international volunteers.

The public database, again, allowed tracking numbers of Solidarity projects grants and the Volunteering projects grants awarded in years 2021, 2022, and 2023. The total numbers of awarded projects grew from 1882 in 2021 to 2589 in 2023, with a near even division between Solidarity Projects and the Volunteering Projects in all years (Graph 3.2a)

Graph 3.2a: Number of ESC Solidarity and Volunteering grants, by year (all organisation types)



6 Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas & Volunteering in Support of Humanitarian Aid Operations have not been included in the analyses, as they are not widely accessed by youth organisations and represent a small number of grants:

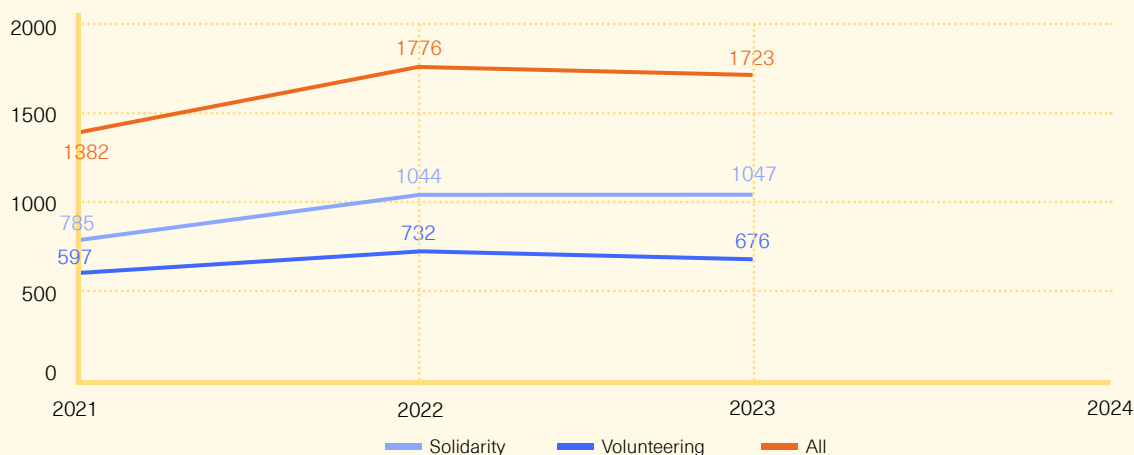
An analysis of the organisational co-ordinating entities reveals that not all Solidarity and Volunteering grants go to organisations which are operating or within the youth civic space. Solidarity and Volunteering grants to youth-related civil society organisations represent between two thirds and three quarters of all grants of this type.

to this type of organisation, by 2023 this had fallen to two thirds (Graph 3.2c). The decline is primarily as a result of Volunteering grants. In 2021 just under one third of all Solidarity and Volunteering grants were made up of Volunteering grants to youth-related civil society organisations. By 2023 this had fallen to just over one quarter (Graph 3.2c)

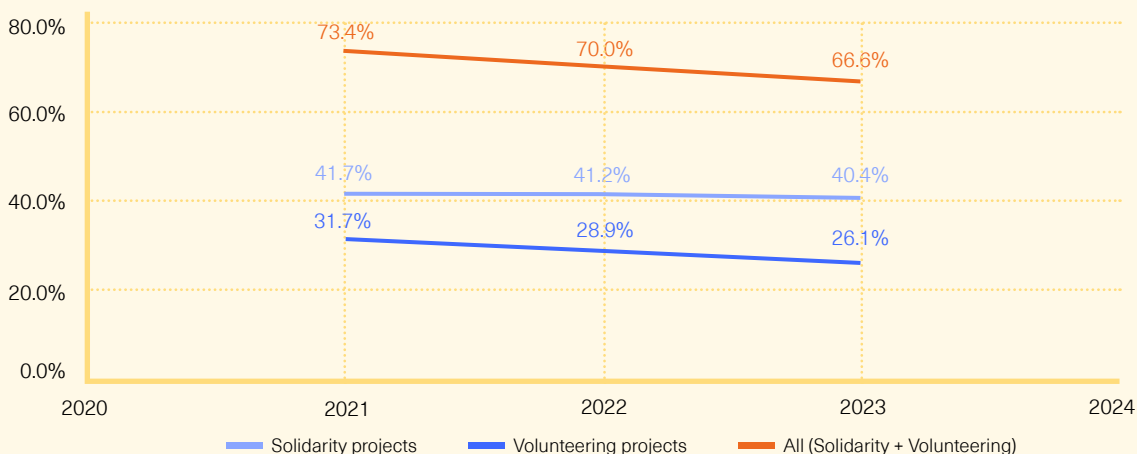
As with the overall trend, the number of grants awarded to youth-related civil society organisations broadly increased between 2021-2023 (Graph 3.2b). However, youth-related civil society organisations have not experienced increases at the same rate as other organisations. The proportion of grants awarded to youth-related civil society organisations is strongly declining year on year. In 2021 around three quarters of all Solidarity and Volunteering grants were awarded

Alongside this, youth-related civil society organisations constantly receive grants for a much lower amount of Volunteering projects than Solidarity projects. In 2022 and 2023, the number of Volunteering grants received was almost half in comparison to the Solidarity grants (Graph 3.2b). This contrasts the overall trend for all types of organisations where proportions of Solidarity and Volunteering grants are roughly equal (Graph 3.2a).

Graph 3.2b: Number of ESC Solidarity and Volunteering grants to youth-related civil society organisations, by year



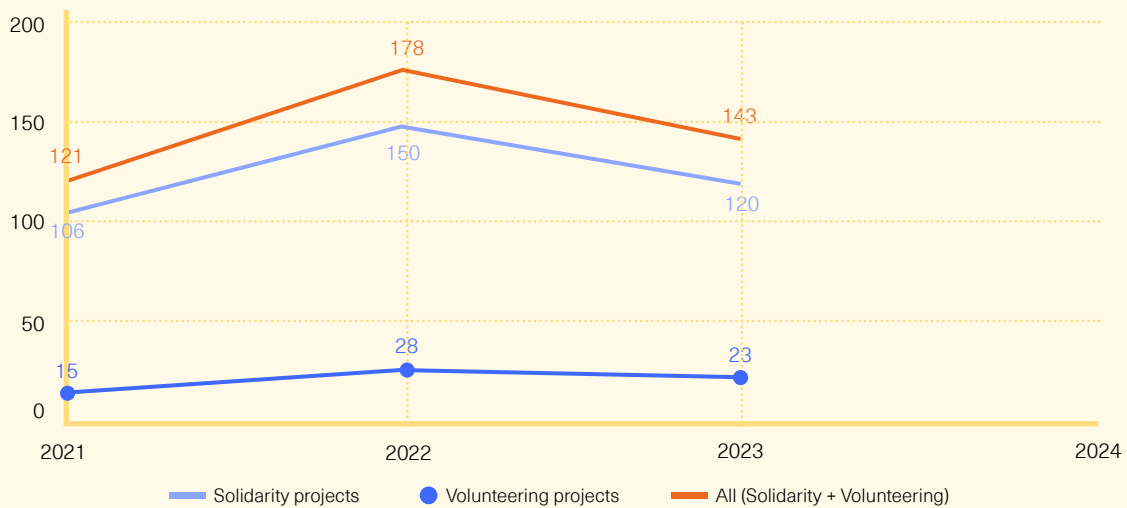
Graph 3.2c: ESC Solidarity and Volunteering grants to youth-related civil society organisation as a proportion of all Solidarity and Volunteering grants, by year



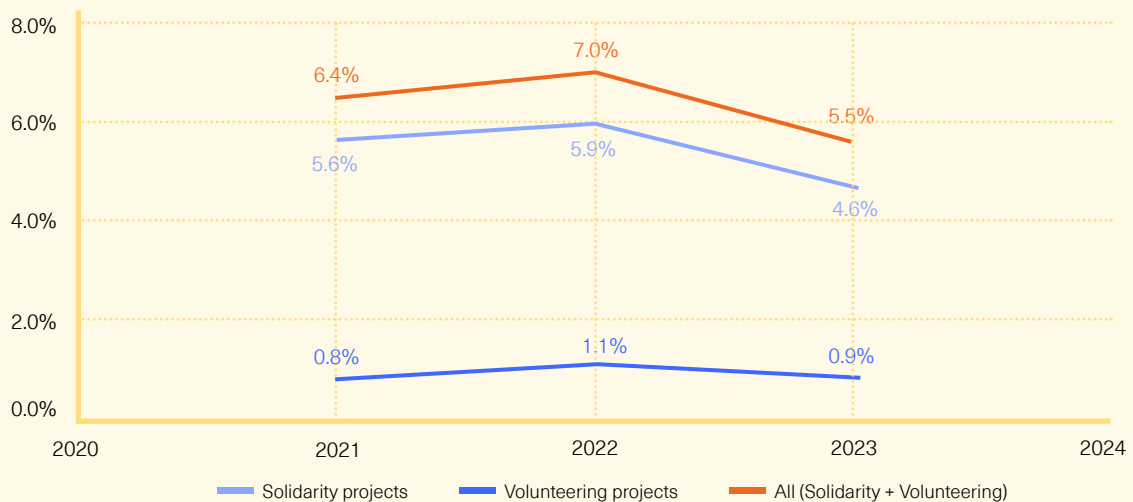
When youth organisations⁷ alone are considered, firstly it can be seen that these organisations receive only 100 to 200 grants per year representing around 5-7% of all Solidarity and Volunteering Grants (Graph 3.2e). This fluctuates over the years, with a minor increase overall between 2021 and 2023. The difference between the numbers of Solidarity and Volunteering Projects implemented over the years is striking. Volunteering Projects represented only about a tenth of grants awarded to youth organisations (Graph 3.2d).

This is a strong contrast to the trend for all organisations where proportions of Solidarity and Volunteering projects are roughly even (Graph 3.2a). A moderate general decline can be seen when the proportion of Solidarity and Volunteering grants which are made to youth organisations is considered (Graph 3.2e). This is primarily made up of decline in Solidarity grants; Volunteering grants made to youth organisations represent a minimal amount of all grants (1%) with little space for further decline.

Graph 3.2d: Number of ESC Solidarity and Volunteering grants to youth organisations, by year



Graph 3.2e: ESC Solidarity and Volunteering grants to youth organisations as a proportion of all Solidarity and Volunteering Grants, by year



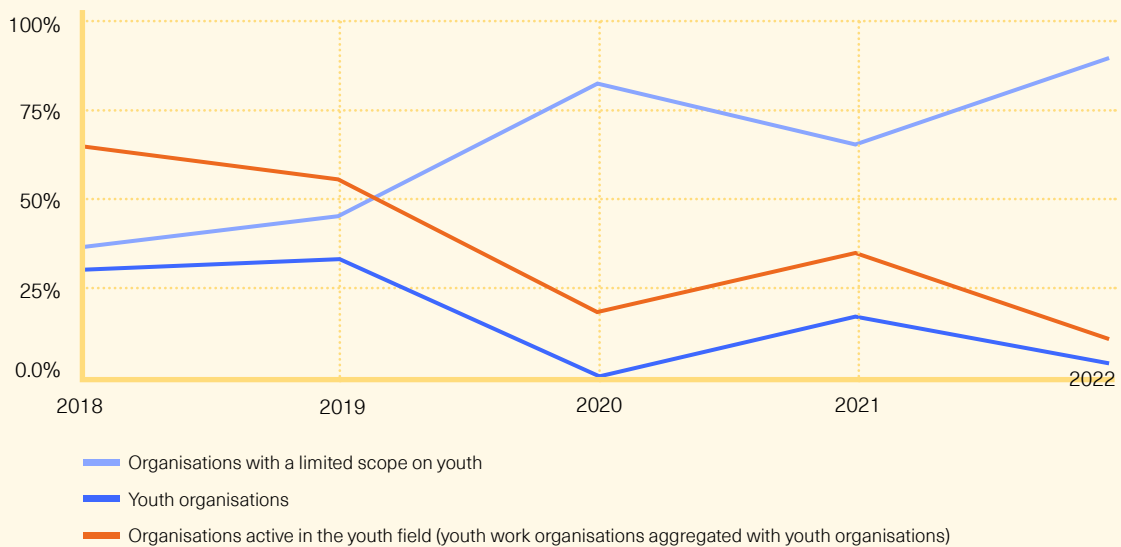
7 As there are no established definitions within the E+ program, this may potentially include organisations which are not democratically youth-led. Categorisation is based on self identification of applicants.

European Youth Together grants

European Youth Together is a centralised Erasmus+ grant action under the Key Action 3 which aims to create networks promoting regional partnerships, to be run in close cooperation with young people from across Europe. The action is intended to support transnational partnerships for youth organisations from both grassroots and large-scale level, aiming to reinforce the European dimension of their activities.

Prior analysis by the European Youth Forum (2024) has identified the extent to which youth organisations (defined here as organisations democratically led by young people) and organisations active in the youth field have been successful in receiving funding through the European Youth Together element of Erasmus+ 2014-2020 programme (Graph 3.3a). The analysis indicates that there has generally been a strong downtrend in the amount of youth organisations and youth field organisations receiving these grants, accompanied by an increase in organisations with previously limited scope on youth.

Graph 3.3a: Organisations that successfully applied for European Youth Together for the 2018-2022 period



Source: European Youth Forum (2024: p10)

Chapter summary

These findings support the concerns of The European Parliament (2024), and of many youth organisations in general that there are '*significantly fewer successful applications from youth and volunteer-led organisations*' (ibid: para 38).

Whilst the number of KA1 and KA2 youth chapter grants made to all organisation types through Erasmus+ has risen over the years, this increase has not benefited youth-related civil society organisations and youth organisations as much as other types of organisations.

Although youth-related civil society organisations still represent a substantial proportion of grants made through KA1 and KA2, the proportion of grants being awarded to this type of organisations is decreasing year on year. Moreover, the proportion of grants used to support long-term co-operation of youth-related civil society organisations (i.e., KA2) shows a pronounced downward trend. Increases in the number of grants received by youth-related civil society organisations are primarily made up of KA1 grants.

Youth organisations (a smaller group within youth-related civil society) consistently represent a relatively small proportion (less than one in 10) of grants awarded through KA1 and KA2. The number of grants youth organisations are receiving is generally increasing in line with the overall trends. However, this increase is made nearly exclusively of KA1 grants. A declining proportion of grants are being used to support long term cooperation (i.e.KA2) of youth organisations.

The shift toward KA1 away from KA2 can be interpreted as a shift away from grants which support long term cooperation in the youth civic space and toward grants which develop individual's competences and mobility.

That is to say, the extent to which the Erasmus+ programme is supporting long term development, collaboration and building of partnership within youth civil society is declining.

This can further be seen in the result relating to European Youth Together grants, where it is clear although these grants are intended to support transnational partnerships for youth organisations from both grassroots and large-scale level, the grants are primarily being received by organisations with a limited scope on youth.

A similar situation is seen in the European Solidarity Corps. Whilst the amount of ESC Solidarity and Volunteering Grants has generally risen over the years, youth-related civil society organisations and especially youth organisations have not benefited strongly from this increase. The proportion of grants made to youth-related civil society organisations has declined strongly over the years. The proportion of grants made to youth organisations has remained consistently low with some signs of decline. Youth-related civil society organisations and youth organisations are much less engaged in Volunteering Grants when compared to Solidarity Grants. This strongly contrasts the trend for all organisation types, where engagement in both types of grants is near equal. This is again a source of concern in that it is clear that resources within the programme are progressively moving away from youth civil society. The low engagement with Volunteering grants is especially concerning, as it could be expected that action to support youth volunteering, should be well utilised by organisations that are often volunteer-led.

The lack of clear organisational definitions within the two programmes, and resultant impact on monitoring of which organisations receive grants is also a concern. Within the available data, it is still not fully clear the extent to which grants go to youth-led organisations, volunteer-led organisations or civil society organisations exclusively focused on young people. Whilst there are legitimate youth sector actors outside of youth civil society (such as public services for young people) that are benefiting from programme grants, anecdotally there is also increasing concern about the intentions of private sector actors.

One interviewee described how the complexity of the application process has meant that, in their country, professional consultancy firms have started to apply for EU Youth Programme grants, inviting youth civil society to bid along with them to give their application the veneer of coming from youth civil society. In their opinion, public money that is meant to strengthen youth civil society is instead going to corporations and private companies, which is contrary to what the EU intended. In this country, the National Youth Council is working together with the National Agency, to warn youth civil society about the hazards of such partnerships.

“

'As a result of the complicated application process, one of our biggest obstacles right now is that so many professional agencies apply for [the EU Youth Programmes]. They approach youth CSOs only when they need a signature, to make it look like 'proper' youth civil society, and as partners, youth CSOs get the money [but they aren't in the lead]. So, we have to inform our member organisations about this to make them aware of what it means, because it sounds too good to be true.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

“

'There are organisations that are made up only to get E+ funds, and they are definitely dependent, targeting KA1 and KA2. They live off of these calls. But they are not really our members.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

“

'If I was in charge of a NA, I would go to meetings of these youth-led organisations and make a presentation on how their work can fit into Erasmus. Also to find out, what is stopping them from applying?'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

04

Ability of EU Youth Programme grants to effectively support young people's engagement in civil society

The positive impact of the EU Youth Programmes on beneficiaries is generally well established and accepted. However, past research has not always analysed the impact of the programmes specifically for youth organisations and youth civil society.

Considering the programme's impact on organisations of all types, from a historical perspective, research has shown that the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 enabled youth workers to obtain a wide range of skills and knowledge. Much of these are competences connected to the domain of participation and civic space, such as communication skills, European values, digital skills, intercultural skills, or knowledge on active participation and citizenship (Bammer et al. 2019:70-88).

Moreover, evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which included surveys with participants of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Programmes, confirmed that 'the expected outcomes were achieved in terms of promoting youth participation, fostering solidarity and intercultural understanding, supporting youth empowerment and enabling active citizenship.' (European Commission 2024e:78) Specifically, young people participating in either of these programmes reported positive impacts in the following domains: level of influence over what happens in Europe, increased knowledge of issues youth is facing, ability to contribute to the debate on societal challenges (ibid). There is clear evidence of the impact of the programmes on increasing young people's understanding of civil society. 59.2% young people say they learn something about participation in civil society as a result of being involved in an Erasmus+ youth project and 53.9% report being more engaged in civil society after taking part in the project; similar results are also seen for youth workers (Herranz et al. 2024).

It is also established that as a result of these positive developments, organisations themselves change as well. They may support staff to become specialists towards a certain target group (e.g., young people who are NEET), reflection within the organisations may be boosted, and even methods used in implemented activities may be revised and updated (Bammer et al. 2019:119). The Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 also enabled youth field actors to network and seek new partnerships with other organisations and with public administrations. However, the stability of new networks is strongly related to the know-how retention ability of organisations: once skilled workers leave, partnerships often fall apart as well. It was also reported that due to lack of financial and personal resources, youth sector organisations may rely on volunteers to a large extent, which limits the capacity of these organisations to prepare and implement activities for young people (ibid:62).



'Projects on media literacy and tackling fake news, for example, are topics that are underexplored in the formal education curriculum. So, it makes a big difference that they can be supported by Erasmus+.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

The programmes are clearly able to deliver positive outcomes for both young people and organisations. However, the delivery of these outcomes is hindered by a variety of challenges, such as the finances available through the grants; excessive level of their bureaucratic threshold in application, implementation and reporting phases; or lack of flexibility of the programme. Previous research has identified that financial planning is becoming more difficult for stakeholders in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes due to unexpected inflation rates, rendering the budgetary allocations insufficient to carry out planned activities, especially travels (European Parliamentary Research Service 2023:40) and caring for volunteers (ibid:85). Current publications addressing the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 suggest that insufficient and delayed financial support has been a major hurdle for project participants (European Parliament 2024: para 26). Calls to increase budgetary allocations within the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027 have been made, especially in view of the increasing prices and inflation rates (Committee on Culture and Education 2023a). At the same time, regular funding for European Solidarity Corps Quality Label holders has been requested to bring stability and allow the organisation space for long-term planning (ibid).

In this context it is worthy of exploring the specific experiences of youth civil society organisation and youth organisation in receipt of grants from the EU Youth Programmes. The remainder of this chapter considers benefits of grants to youth organisations including how these vary for volunteer focused and youth-led organisations, the financial challenges posed by the grants and the relationship between youth civil society and grant makers.

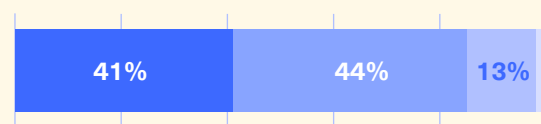
Overall benefits of grants to youth civil society organisations

The findings of this research indicate that youth organisations and youth civil society organisations generally identify positive benefits of participation in the EU Youth Programmes, similar to those outlined by previous literature. Among the organisations surveyed, the EU Youth Programmes are generally appreciated for their contribution to both youth-led organisations and to the youth sector in general (Graph 4.1a). society organisations

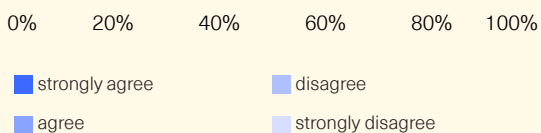
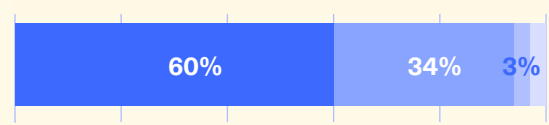
Graph 4.1a: Effectiveness of the EU Youth Programmes at strengthening youth organisation and the youth sector

How much do you agree with the following statements?

The EU youth programmes are good at strengthening youth led organisations



The EU youth programmes are good at strengthening the youth sector



The survey results (Graph 4.1b) show that youth civil society organisations considered the EU Youth Programmes to be successful in enabling them to:

- Deliver projects to young people
- Improve the quality of youth work
- Provide training for youth workers or youth leaders
- Support young people to participate in civil society

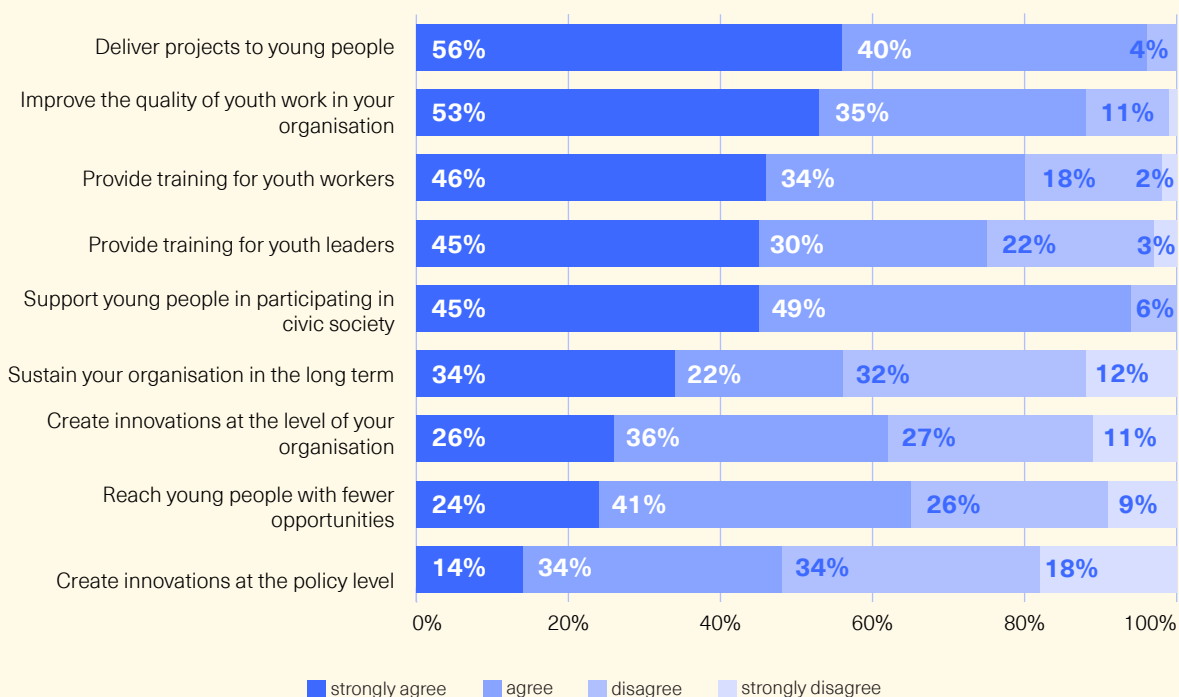
95% of organisations indicated the programmes enabled them to support young people to participate in civil society either to a great extent or to some extent.

Nevertheless, when it comes to more complex and long-term aims the EU Youth Programmes are rated much less enthusiastically, suggesting that there is room for improvement in better enabling their organisation to:

- Sustaining their organisation in the long term
- Create innovation at organisation level
- Create innovation at policy level
- Reach young people with fewer opportunities

Graph 4.1b: Benefits of the EU Youth Programmes for youth organisations and youth civil society

To what extent do the EU Youth programmes enable your organisation to:

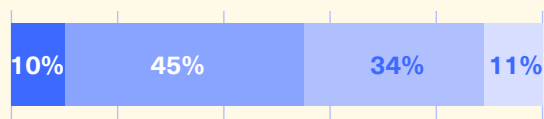


The room for improvement for long-term support can be seen, for example, in the domains of digitalisation and environmental sustainability (Graph 4.1c). Survey participants perceive both areas as only partially supported by the EU Youth Programme funds, with only a minority considering the funds supportive to a great extent. Both 'Digital Transformation' and 'Environment and fight against climate change' are horizontal priorities within the Erasmus+ Programme, driven by wider European concerns to provide development in these areas (Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024). The survey responses underline the relative lack of support the organisations perceive from the EU Youth Programmes when it comes to their long-term development.

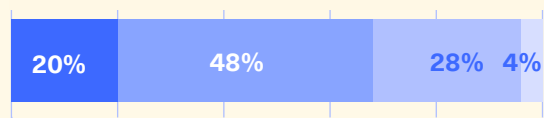
Graph 4.1c: Contribution of the EU Youth Programmes to digital and green transformation

To what extent do the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to cover the following costs?

Digitalisation (e.g., capacity building in this domain)



Environmentally sustainable option (e.g., green travel)



0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

to great extent not much
to some extent not at all

Overall, in the experiences of youth civil society organisations, the EU Youth Programmes are effective at enabling them to deliver immediate projects, both youth-focused and youth worker focused ones. However, the programmes could do better in supporting long-term organisational sustainability, and innovation within youth civil society. To some extent, this finding might also be explained by lack of flexibility within programme grants (Graph 4.1d). Half of the surveyed organisations also consider the EU Youth Programmes to lack flexibility needed to meet their needs. This indicates there is substantial room for improvement in order for the youth programmes to adapt to the realities of youth organisations and youth civil society.

Graph 4.1d: The EU Youth Programmes are flexible enough to meet the needs of my organisation (rating)



0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

strongly agree disagree
agree strongly disagree

Difference in benefits for different types of youth civil society organisations

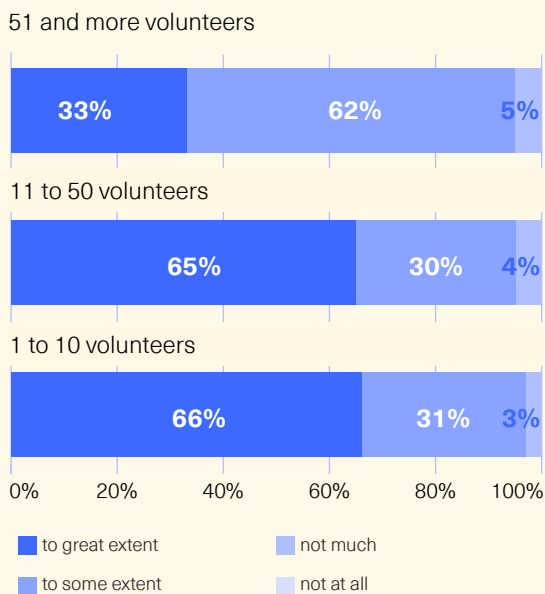
Within the survey, the greater the number of volunteers an organisation had, the less likely they were to say that EU Youth Programmes enabled their organisations to:

- Deliver projects to young people,
- Improve the quality of youth work in the organisation,
- Provide training to youth workers or youth leaders,
- Reach young people with fewer opportunities.

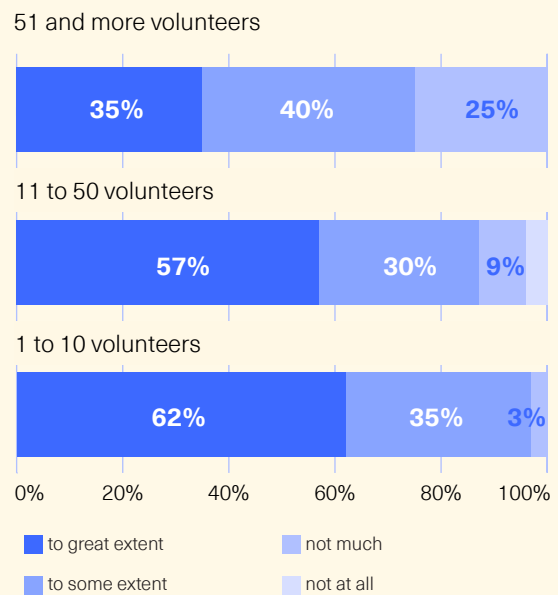
(Graphs 4.2a - 4.2e).

Organisations with larger numbers of volunteers were also less likely to report that the EU Youth Programmes were flexible enough to meet the needs of their organisations and less likely to say that the EU Youth Programmes were good at strengthening youth-led organisations (Graph 4.2f & 4.2g).

Graph 4.2a: To what extent do the EU Youth Programmes enable your organisation to deliver projects to young people? (response by number of organisation volunteers)

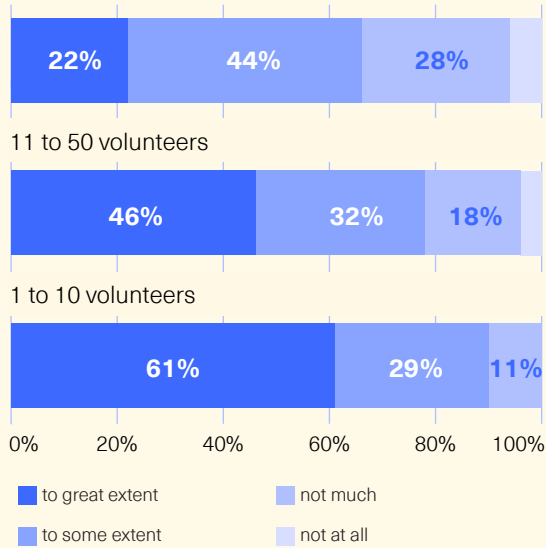


Graph 4.2b: To what extent do the EU Youth Programmes enable your organisation to improve the quality of youth work in your organisation? (response by number of organisation volunteers)



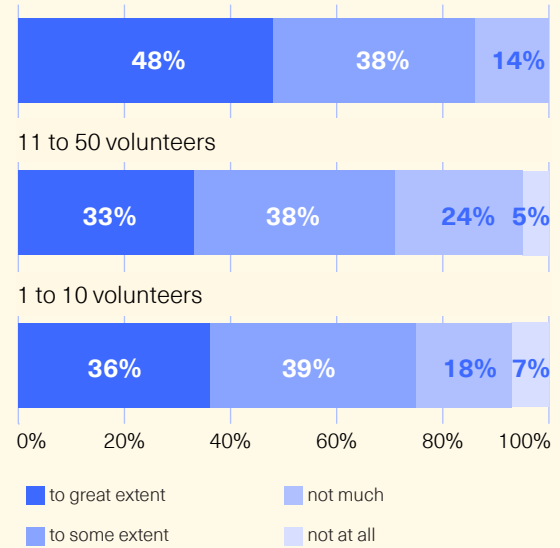
Graph 4.2c: To what extent do the EU Youth Programmes enable your organisation to provide training for youth workers? (response by number of organisation volunteers)

51 and more volunteers



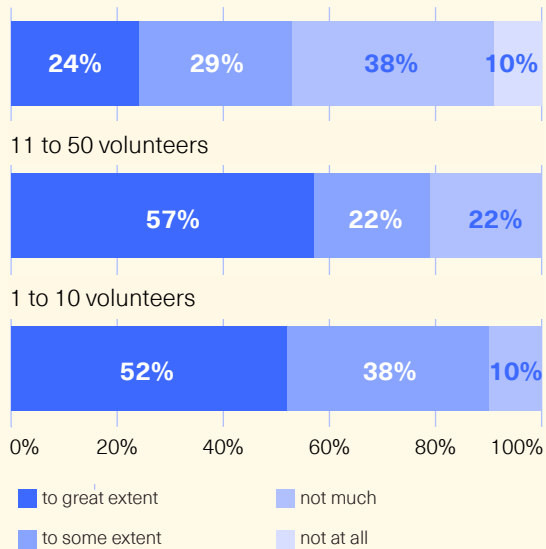
Graph 4.2e: To what extent do the EU Youth Programmes enable your organisation to reach young people with fewer opportunities? (response by number of organisation volunteers)

51 and more volunteers



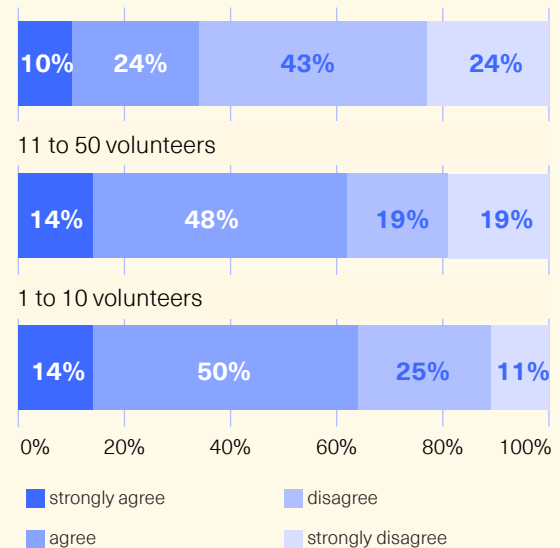
Graph 4.2d: To what extent do the EU Youth Programmes enable your organisation to provide training for youth leaders? (response by number of organisation volunteers)

51 and more volunteers

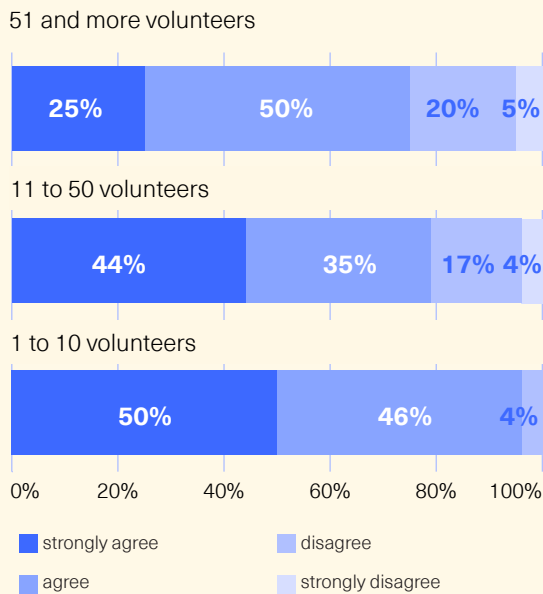


Graph 4.2f: The EU Youth Programmes are flexible enough to meet the needs of my organisation (level of agreement, by number of organisation volunteers)

51 and more volunteers



Graph 4.2g: The EU Youth Programmes are good at strengthening youth led organisations (level of agreement, by number of organisation volunteers)



There may be important country-based differences and national contexts which are not revealed by the survey⁸ results. Within the interviews, it was identified that organisations operating in countries with good national funding for youth civil society either from government or private foundations, often saw European programmes as an ‘add-on’ work. For already overburdened youth organisations trying to establish programmes for local youth, European funds were seen as too complicated and requiring too much reporting, in comparison to national funds. Moreover, sometimes what youth organisations would like to do is not aligned with the priorities of Erasmus+, whereas national funding is more closely related to the needs of the local reality. As a result, for better or worse, EU Youth Programmes were not seen as transformative tools for youth civic space in these countries, and many organisations simply did not apply for it.

“

‘There are problems: youth radicalisation, housing in the cities, the big divide between rural youth and people in the cities. I wish [EU Youth Programmes] could help address these structural problems facing young people in my country’

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

“

‘It’s an ‘add-on’ to think and work in the ‘European way’, and it’s not because the European Union is not important to these organisations. It’s because resources are so tight that youth organisations say ‘going European’ is something they really can’t do in their capacities. They would need at least one staff person whose whole job is European proposals.’

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

8 Survey data did not allow for country-based comparison.

By contrast, some interviewees from National Youth Councils described how the EU Youth Programmes could play a pivotal role in what they call '*independent youth civil society*.' Research participants identified how, in countries experiencing democratic backsliding, some youth civil society organisations are losing, or struggling to access funding especially when they are deemed oppositional to the current government or not well established nationally. This issue might potentially affect the ability of youth organisations to successfully apply for funding as coordinators of Erasmus+ bids (as grant decisions are made by the National Agency from the country in which the organisation is based). However, the ability of youth organisations to be partners within bids submitted to National Agencies within other countries acts as a safeguard, with funding decisions made outside of the organisation's country.

“

'Usually, the grants from the [national] ministries are almost untouchable for smaller [youth] organisations. They are less known at the national level, and less established. But you can still get Erasmus funds, even if you are an organisation of 10 people. It helps the youth sector a lot, makes funding more accessible than if there was only state support.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council



Ability of grants to financially support youth civil society organisations

The survey questions addressed the extent to which the financial support provided by the EU Youth Programmes enables youth civic spaces. Surveyed organisations indicated that the programmes mostly fund costs immediately linked to any given activity or project, but when it comes to long-term expenses such as staff salaries and administrative costs, the situation is seen by organisations in a much less positive light (Graph 4.3a). This supports the findings above identifying that youth organisations and youth civil society are much less positive about the programmes ability to support their long-term development when compared to immediate project delivery.

Participants in the interviews and focus groups expressed a lack of overall funding for capacity-building, which would go a long way in strengthening their operations and ability to carry out high-quality projects. This supports the findings in chapter three, relating to the limited access of youth organisations to KA2 grants. One interview participant in particular mentioned how COVID hit youth organisations particularly hard in terms of capacity, and that they needed to rebuild, however there was limited financial support to do so.

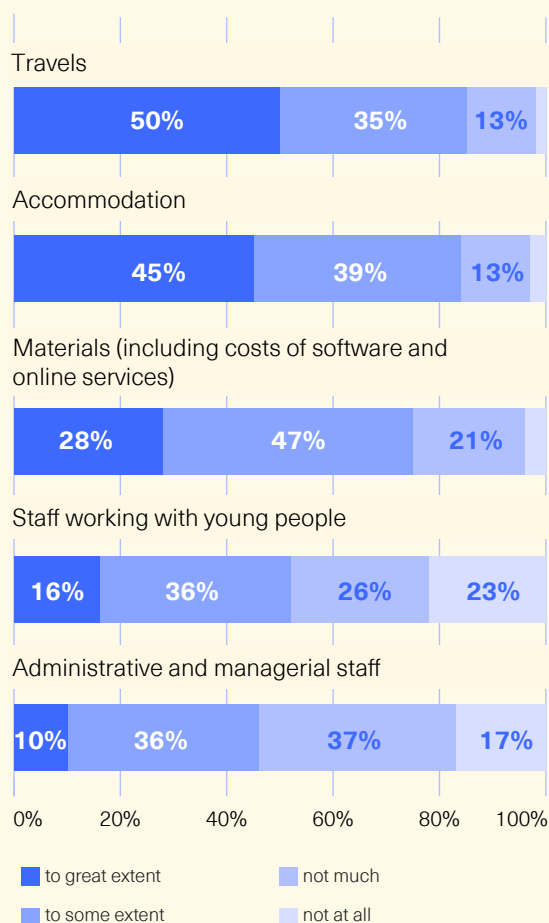
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[After COVID], with the rise of inflation, salaries being high, office rentals, hotels now or even caterers - this is all much more expensive than it used to be'

— Focus group participant

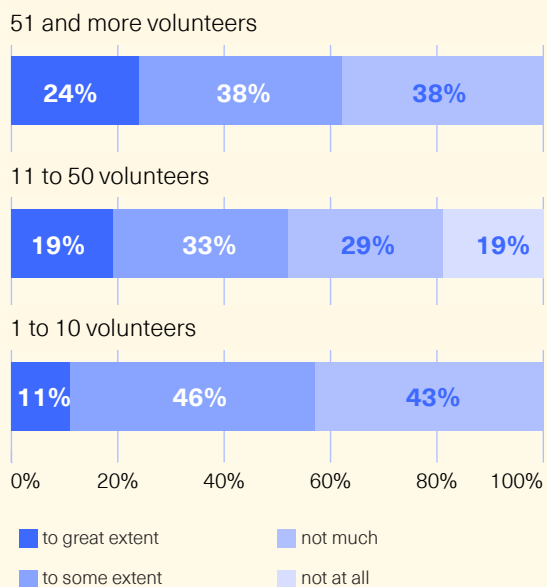
Participants described how current granting does not encourage reflection inwards, on an organisation's own capacity, and it could be strengthened or improved. Participants from INGyOs described an over-emphasis on innovation in the EU Youth Programmes, where organisations are pressured to constantly demonstrate that they are doing something new, as opposed to supporting existing approaches that are working well, and perhaps could be strengthened or scaled-up.

Graph 4.3a: To what extent do the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to cover the following costs?

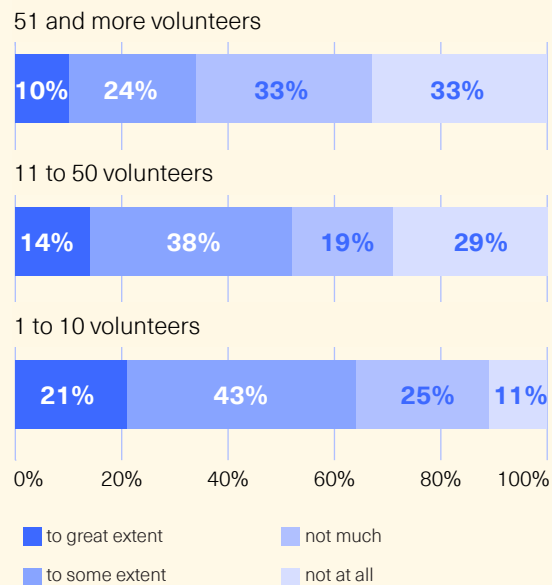


The more volunteers there are in an organisation, the less content the organisation is when it comes to covering the costs of administrative and managerial staff (Graph 4.3b & Graph 4.3c). This can be well linked to the fact that volunteers always need administrative and managerial support from a given organisation. The EU Youth Programmes possibly do not cover administrative and managerial staff to such an extent that organisations working with large numbers of volunteers (and hence needing higher numbers of administrative and managerial staff) are able to cover their needs.

Graph 4.3b: To what extent do the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to cover administrative and managerial staff? (responses by number of organisation volunteers)



Graph 4.3c: To what extent do the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to cover staff working with young people? (responses by number of organisation volunteers)



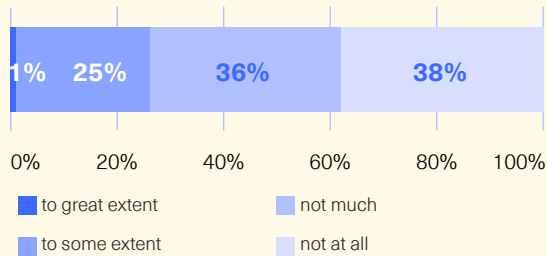
About three quarters of organisations think that the funds available through the EU Youth Programmes is insufficient in keeping up with increasing prices, such as inflation or rent increases (Graph 4.3d). Within the interviews and focus groups, participants described that even the upper limit of 400,000 EUR cannot adequately cover costs when considering inflation, and the higher costs of office space, caterers, and hotels. As an example, one participant explained how 400,000 EUR between four partners in two years only translates to 50,000 EUR per year for a large project, which barely includes costs for staff. The financial pressure placed on youth organisations means that they struggle to deliver the high-quality results through their projects that the EU programmes demand.



'People who are implementing this are important - we need to consider them too, if [the European Commission] wants quality [projects] for the future of youth, future of European values'

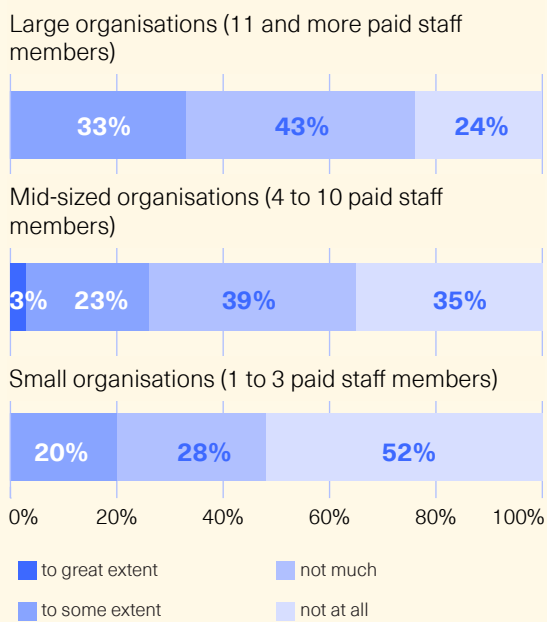
— Focus group participant, on the challenge of covering staff costs

Graph 4.3d: To what extent do the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to keep up with increasing prices? (e.g. inflation, rent increases etc)



Amongst survey respondents, the smaller the organisation's staff base, the less they perceive the EU Youth Programme funds as helpful in keeping up with increasing prices (Graph 4.3e). These figures are alarming as they show the financial peril in which many youth civil society organisations find themselves when they are using the EU Youth Programmes to fund their activities.

Graph 4.3e: To what extent do the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to keep up with increasing prices? (responses by organisation staff size)



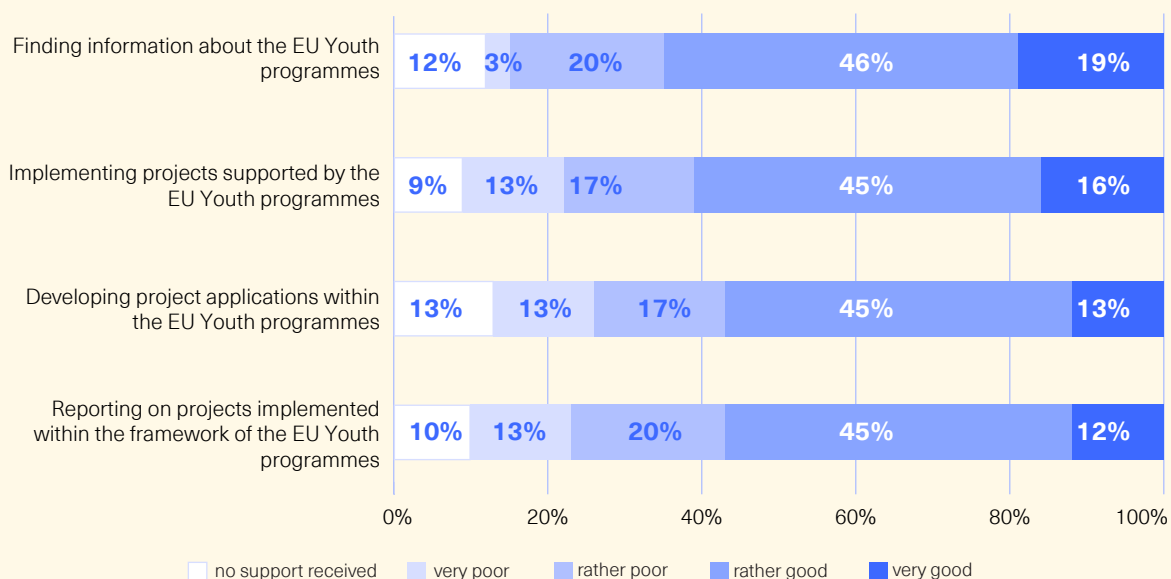
Youth civil society organisations' experiences of grant makers

Within the EU Youth Programmes grants are issued by both the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and National Agencies within programme countries (hereafter both referred to as 'grant makers'). Youth civil society can be understood to have two distinct types of relationship with grant makers. Firstly, as potential beneficiaries of grants, and secondly as national and international stakeholders with potential to support the voice of young people in the planning of the programmes through meaningful youth participation.

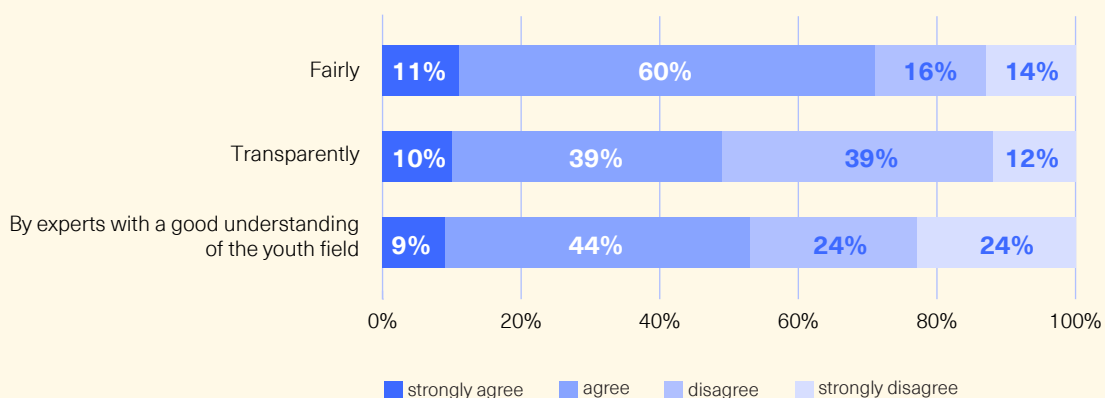
Amongst the surveyed organisations, roughly two thirds of organisations reported received very or rather good support as beneficiaries from grant makers across all areas. Although about 10% of the surveyed organisations reported not receiving any support from grant makers, this may be in part because they did not feel the need to seek support (Graph 4.4a).

However, almost 30% of the surveyed organisations do not think that project applications are assessed fairly, and around 50% of them do not think the assessment is transparent or done by experts with a good understanding of the youth field (Graph 4.5a). These findings do not show confidence of the youth civil society organisations in grant makers. Within the interviews and focus groups, participants highlighted the lack of transparency with how projects are selected. Concerns were raised relating to contradicting feedback received for different projects in the same evaluation round, lack of quality feedback when applications were rejected, as well as poorly communicated changes to the evaluation process at centralised level being some of the factors contributing to this.

Graph 4.4a: How would you rate the quality of the support your organisation has received in the following areas from the National Agency (or EACEA if this applies to you)?

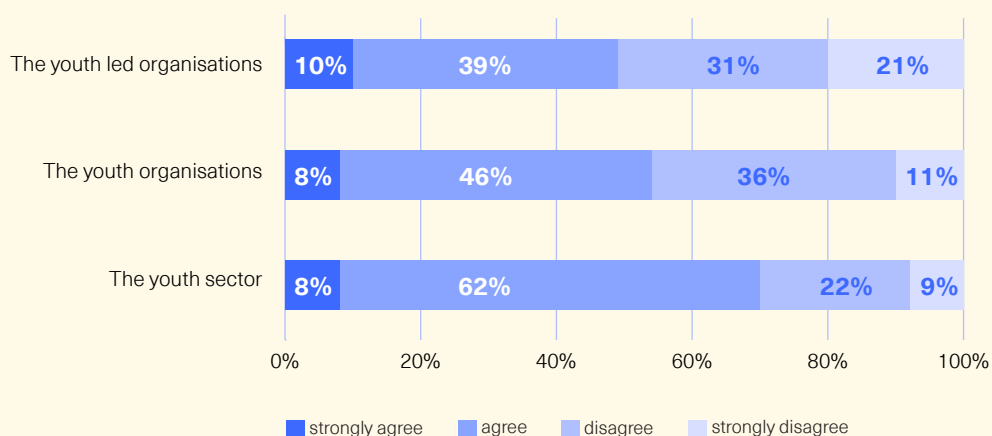


Graph 4.4b: Project applications to the EU Youth Programmes are assessed...



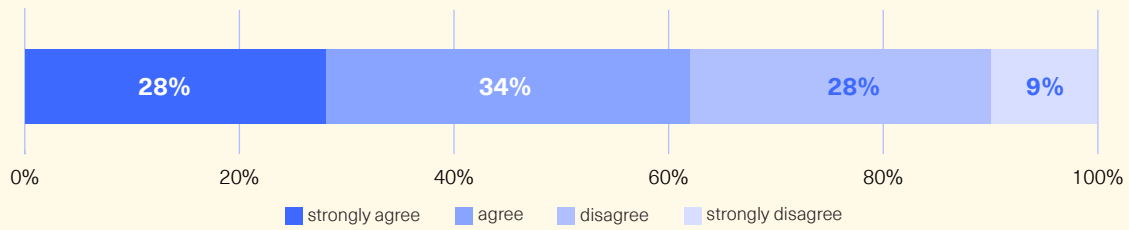
Furthermore, a third of the surveyed organisations believe that grant makers do not have a good understanding of the youth sector, and around half of them state that grant makers do not have a good understanding of both youth organisations and youth-led organisations (Graph 4.4c).

Graph 4.4c: The National Agency in my country (or EACEA if this applies to you) has a good understanding of the needs of...

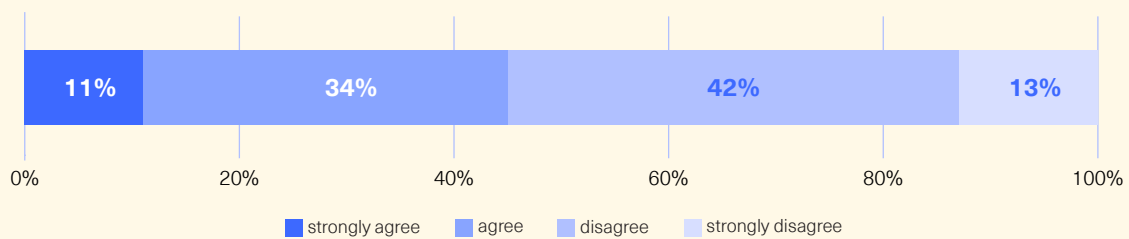


Considering the role of youth civil society as stakeholders, within the survey, about two thirds of the organisations believe that they have good opportunities to give feedback concerning the implementation of the EU Youth Programmes (Graph 4.4d). However, only 45% of them believe that the feedback they provide is taken into account (Graph 4.4e). This suggests that there is room for improvement in both the collection of feedback from the youth field, and in transparency with which the feedback is treated. Both of these measures would increase the connection between the managers of the EU Youth Programmes and the users of these programmes.

Graph 4.4d: My organisation has good opportunities to give feedback on how the EU Youth Programmes are implemented (all responses)



Graph 4.4e: Feedback given by my organisation on the EU Youth Programmes is taken into account (all responses)



Findings from the interviews and focus groups suggest that some of the patterns above might be explained by country-based variations and different approaches across National Agencies. While on the whole, interview and focus group participants report positive relationships with National Agencies, though the situation may be variable depending on the specific National Agency.

“

[The National Youth Council and the National Agency] engage well with each other...but I hear from other colleagues across Europe that they can have very, very different experiences. So, sharing best practices and engagement between the National Agencies to a more significant level in future programmes would be crucially important to support EU values and solidarity!

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

For the most part, National Agencies were described by interviewees as knowledgeable, well connected to youth civil society organisations that were applying for EU Youth Programmes, and supportive overall of youth civil society. It was identified that youth civil society organisations, and especially National Youth Councils often had the opportunity for interactions with National Agencies. For example, in one country, the interviewee described the National Agency as holding a lot of face-to-face training, for example, application clinics or project management days, which were seen to provide good support for the application process. In several cases, the interaction of National Youth Councils and National Agencies was institutionalised in advisory groups or programming committees. In the case of Erasmus+, some National Youth Councils reported meeting with National Agencies (and often also with ministries of youth) on a regular basis (e.g. 2 times per year) to give feedback on the programme. One National Youth Council cited a positive example of collaboration, where the National Agency asked them to contribute to an evaluation, and all of their critiques were addressed as part of improving their service. Some interviewees described how National Agencies seek the support of National Youth Councils, on how to better conduct outreach to youth civil society.

However, by contrast in another country, the interviewee remarked that in-person support, where youth civil society organisations could directly meet with and ask National Agencies for support on applications, was likely not very possible, and limited by National Agency resources. The interviewee was not aware of any National Agencies consultation with youth civil society organisations on the implementation and management of the programmes at all. The interviewee could only recount that National Agencies invited youth organisations to write suggestions on their website, and it wasn't clear where these suggestions go. In this instance, there seemed to be little effort of the National Agency to be well connected to youth civil society.

One trend of concern for organisations interviewed was that National Agencies seek the advice of unorganised youth, and not just youth civil society organisations. For example, one focus group participant described how a National Agency recently set up a Youth Advisory Board, whose objective is to advise the National Agency on its programming. It is made up of 20 young people who applied through an open, public call. In the focus group, some participants took issue with prioritising unorganised youth for these advisory positions, instead remarking that organised youth (those belonging to or associated with youth organisations) should instead be in such boards, as they are able to represent a larger constituency of youth, and can transfer knowledge and a more representative account of the collective lived experiences of young people through the structure of their youth organisation.

Considering involvement as stakeholders of the programme at European level, participants in focus groups described a relatively limited number of mechanisms through which INGYO have been involved in giving feedback on the EU Youth Programmes. Some participants also described the political reluctance of the European Commission to engage meaningfully with the views of INGYOs. Opportunities participants had engaged in included responding to open calls published to the public, which seek inputs at key programme monitoring moments, such as the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme. In other cases, participants were invited to specific meetings regarding the implementation of the programme, such as a User Sounding Board for European Solidarity Corps tools hosted by a technical

team, where INGYOs could give feedback on their user experience with digital tools, including ideas on new features, and being updated on what technical features were coming in the future.

Overall, opinions on the quality and meaningfulness of these participation opportunities were mixed. Participants were concerned that engagements focused too often on the implementation aspects of the programme (e.g., inclusion or use of digital tools) but opportunities to give input on the more substantive aspects, such as the key objectives of the programme, or different budgetary measures, were too limited. In most cases, participants also felt sceptical about the impact of their ideas and proposals. They highlighted there was rarely any feedback given about if or how their ideas were considered, if they were implemented or not, and if not, why. In the case of the public call for inputs for the mid-term evaluation of the programme, for example, only a report with statistics was published on the results of the public consultation, but no comprehensive explanation given on to what happened to the feedback, despite the extensive effort often put in by youth organisations to give this feedback. In this way, research participants saw their influence on programme governance at European level as rather limited and often restricted to consultative modes.

“

'There was not really a comprehensive report of the feedback that organisations like ours provided via the public call. [The report published] was purely statistics, but not really how the program is going to improve based on the feedback that we have provided.'

— INGYO focus group participant

'When they did a massive stakeholder meeting, it was at a time when the whole program was already decided. So, they're doing some of these consultations for the sake of showcasing that they are consulting with us, but at the end of the day, you cannot really influence the parts of the program.'

— INGYO focus group participant

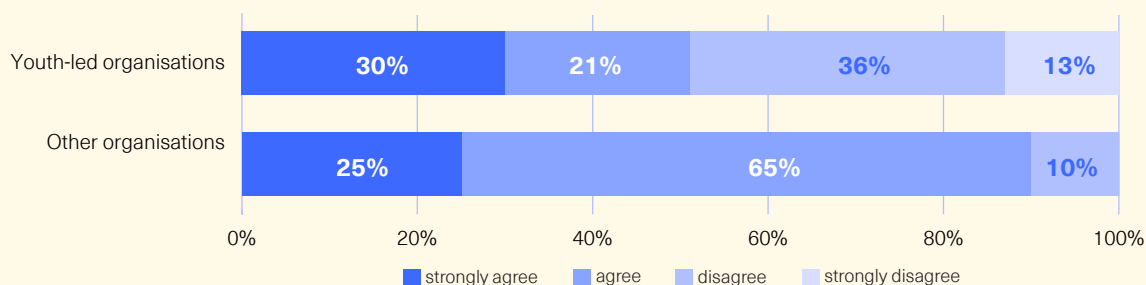
Differences in experiences for volunteer focused and youth-led organisations

Within the survey there were key differences for both youth-led organisations, and volunteer focused organisations when compared to their counterparts regarding their experiences and perceptions of grant makers. On the whole, these results suggest that youth-led organisations and organisations with larger numbers of volunteers may have somewhat of a worse relationship with grant makers than other types of youth civil society, or at least be more critical of their relationships.

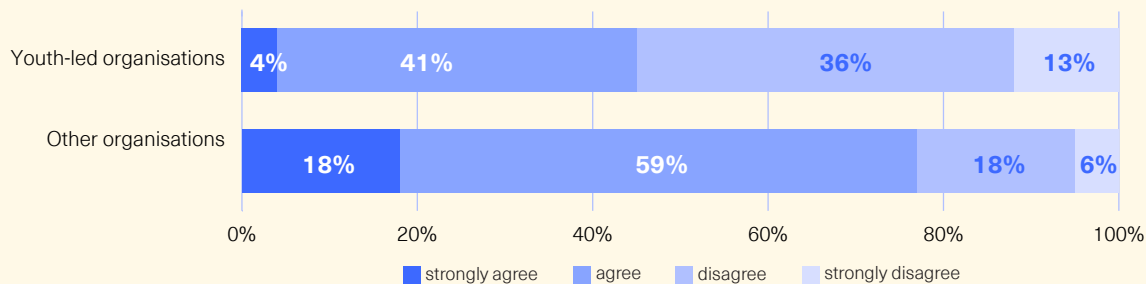
Youth-led organisations report having worse opportunities to give feedback on how the EU Youth Programmes are implemented than their counterparts in other organisations do (Graph 4.5a). Youth-led

organisations are also much more sceptical about the grant makers understanding the needs of youth organisations, the needs of the youth sector, and the needs of youth-led organisations (Graph 4.5b - 4.5d). Youth-led organisations are also more likely to receive no support to develop project applications from grant makers when developing grant applications to the programmes. This could be either as they are less likely to seek support, less likely to receive it or a combination of both. However, those that do receive support also rate the quality of support as worse than their counterparts from other organisations do. Only 6% youth-led organisations state they receive very good support to develop grant applications (Graph 4.5e).

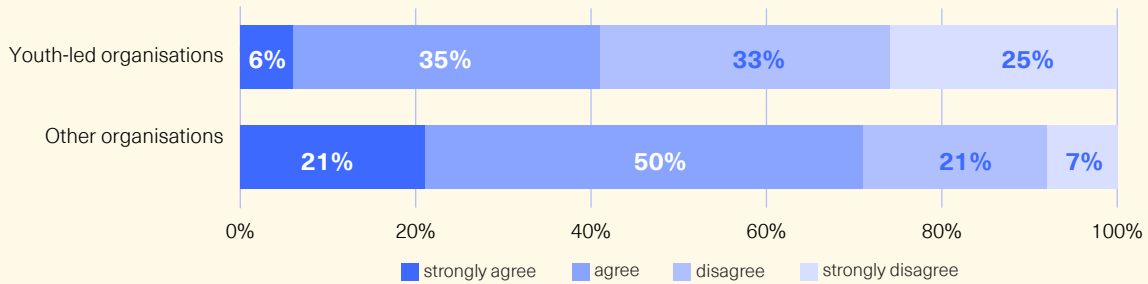
Graph 4.5a: My organisation has good opportunities to give feedback on how the EU Youth Programmes are implemented (level of agreement by youth-led organisations)



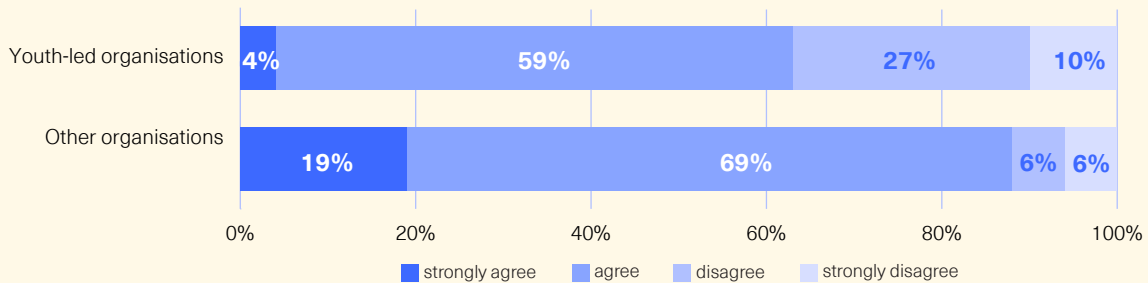
Graph 4.5b: The National Agency in my country (or EACEA if this applies to you) has a good understanding of the needs of youth organisations (level of agreement by youth-led organisations)



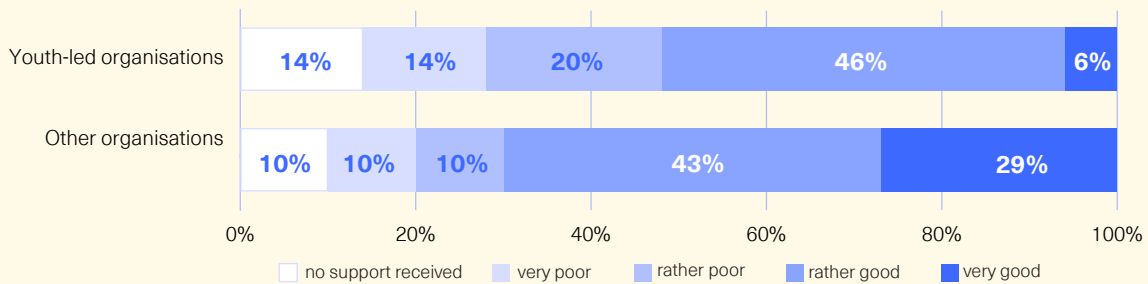
Graph 4.5c: The National Agency in my country (or EACEA if this applies to you) has a good understanding of the needs of youth-led organisations (level of agreement by youth-led organisations)



Graph 4.5d: The National Agency in my country (or EACEA if this applies to you) has a good understanding of the needs of the youth sector (level of agreement by youth-led organisations)

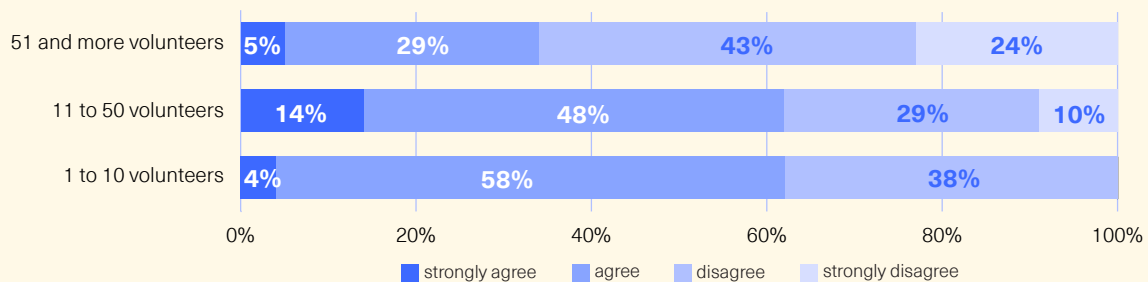


Graph 4.5e: Quality of support received from National Agencies or EACEA to develop project applications (rating from youth-led organisations)

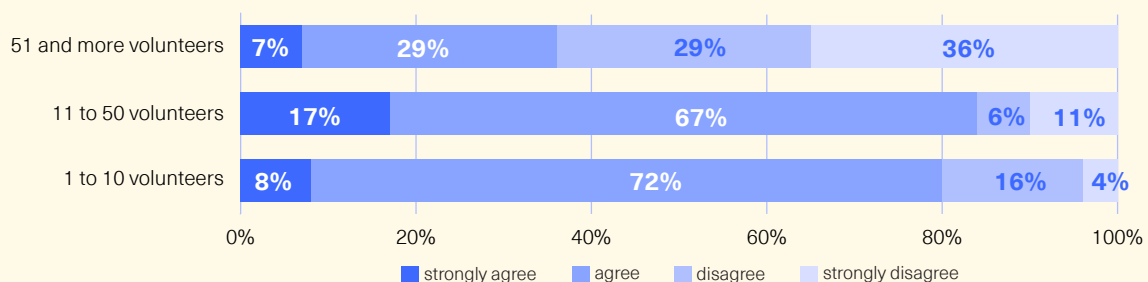


Organisations with larger numbers of volunteers are more sceptical about the understanding that grant makers have of the needs of youth-led organisations and of youth organisations (Graph 4.5f & 4.5g). Organisations with higher numbers of volunteers were more pessimistic about the fairness of the project application assessments as well as about the expertise of the project assessors when compared to their counterparts (Graph 4.5h & 4.5i).

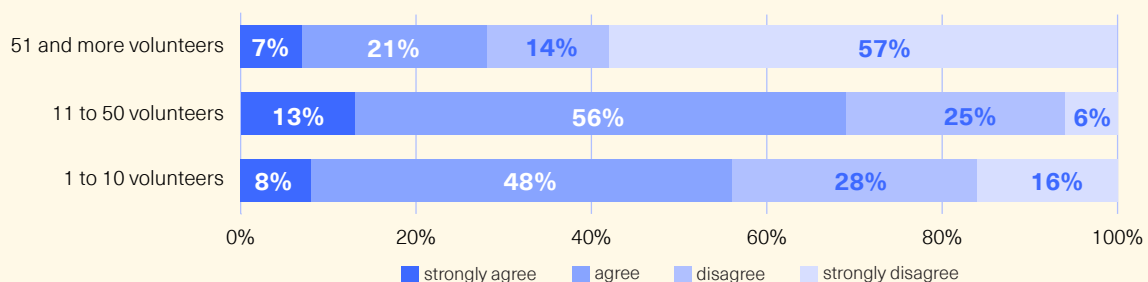
Graph 4.5g: The National Agency in my country (or EACEA if this applies to you) has a good understanding of the needs of youth organisations (level of agreement by number of organisation volunteers)



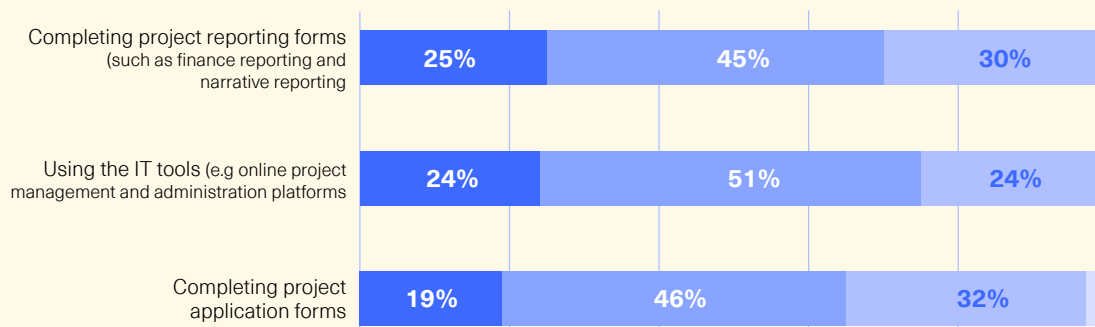
Graph 4.5h: Project applications to the EU Youth Programmes are assessed fairly (level of agreement by number of organisation volunteers)



Graph 4.5i: Project applications to the EU Youth Programmes are assessed by experts with a good understanding of the youth field (level of agreement by number of organisation volunteers)



Graph 5.1a: When involved in grants from Erasmus+ youth actions, how demanding is the following for your organisation?



Chapter summary

It is clear that the programmes overall are able to have a positive impact on young people's engagement in and understanding of civil society. 95% of youth civil society organisations surveyed indicated the programmes enabled them to support young people to participate in civil society either to a great extent or to some extent. This research builds on previous findings from the RAY Network indicating over half (53.9%) of individual participants in Erasmus+ youth chapter projects are more likely to engage with civil society after the project, and 90% of participants agree or strongly agree they are better able to actively engage in civil society after the projects (Herranz et al. 2024). In general youth civil society organisations are positive about the ability of the programmes to support both youth-led organisations and the youth sector. However, according to this research, in the view of youth civil society, programme grants are primarily effective at supporting them to deliver immediate projects to develop participants' learning (both young people and youth workers) and less effective at supporting the longer-term development of youth civil society.

The concerns of the European Parliament (2024: para 26) about insufficient finances within programme grants are also well supported by this research. About three quarters of youth civil society organisations think that the funds available through the EU Youth Programmes is insufficient in keeping up with increasing prices, such as inflation or rent increases. This is especially felt in the area of costs of staff working with young people as well as costs of administrative and managerial staff. Half of the surveyed organisations also indicate the programme grants are not flexible enough to meet their needs.

Alongside this youth civil society organisations with higher numbers of volunteers report less positive benefits from programme grants when compared to their counterparts in other youth civil society organisations. Volunteer focused organisations are less likely to identify that the programmes better enable them to deliver projects to young people, improve the quality of youth work, provide training

for youth workers and youth leaders, and reach young people with fewer opportunities. They find the programmes more lacking in flexibility, and generally view the programmes as less effective at strengthening youth-led civil society. Volunteer focused organisations are also less likely to report that programme grants allowed them to effectively cover staff costs.

On the whole, relationships between youth civil society and grant makers (such as National Agencies) are generally positive. However, many youth civil society organisations have concerns about the transparency of grant decisions and lack of understanding amongst grants makers. Half of surveyed organisations state that grant makers do not have a good understanding of both youth organisations and youth-led organisations. Generally, results also suggest that youth-led organisations and organisations with larger numbers of volunteers may have somewhat of a worse relationship with grant makers than other types of youth civil society, or at least be more critical of these relationships. This suggests that better avenues of collaboration need to be established for grant makers to adapt to and better grasp the realities of youth civil society.

Overall, it is clear the programme grants can provide vital support to youth civil society, and many positive benefits. However, these benefits are most strongly related to learning outcomes for young people and youth workers and are increasingly under threat from financial limitations of grants. Moreover, in the case of volunteer focused organisations, these benefits are felt much less strongly. Furthermore, the ability of the programmes to support youth civil society organisations to sustain and develop in the long term (i.e. the organisation impact) is more limited. It is more challenging for youth civil society organisations to use the programmes to do things such as creating innovation or addressing priorities such as green and digital transformation is more limited. This finding builds on in the previous chapter identifying the relative shifts away from grants providing more organisational support such as KA2 grants, which support long-term partnerships and capacity building.

05

Technical barriers faced by youth civil society when applying for EU Youth Programme grants

There are numerous barriers in utilising the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps Programmes which have been identified by various actors. Historically, calls for simplification of the application and administration of grants, especially in the case of small-scale projects, have been called for in the case of the previous programme generation 2014-2020 (European Commission DG EAC 2018). The improvements mentioned in those historical evaluations also include interoperability and user-friendliness of ICT tools, as well as effectiveness-focused criteria for awarding grant applications. However, these barriers seem to have persisted into the current generation of the programmes.

The European Commission (2018) has been aware that removing unnecessary administrative burdens is key to allowing a wide range of stakeholders to participate in the EU programmes. Several steps were taken to that end, namely: enhanced digitalisation, introduction of fast-track selection procedures, streamlined use of simplified grants including financial planning and reporting (ibid 8). All of these measures helped stakeholders to focus on the content and implementation of the projects, instead of devoting resources to administrative procedures. Further steps were, nevertheless, also suggested by the European Commission (2018:8 & 19). These included application form simplification, review of grant award criteria, increased quality and transparency of the grant award processes.

However, current publications addressing the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 suggest that complicated administrative processes (e.g., continuous reporting) represented a considerable obstacle for organisations, most notably for newcoming and small-scale ones (European Parliament 2024: para 29 and 36). A complicated and time-consuming application process discouraging small-scale organisations and encouraging partnering with consultancy bodies is recognised as another important barrier (ibid: para 30; Committee on Culture and Education 2023b).

The Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament (2023a) has further identified that the age limit within the European Solidarity Corps should also be reduced to improve accessibility of the programme and should follow the general trend in the Erasmus+ youth programme where the lowest age limit is set to 13. Simplifications to the Quality Label⁹, i.e., the system of certification of organisations in the European Solidarity Corps Programme especially in terms of application process and availability of EU languages are also suggested (ibid).

More recently, the European Parliamentary Research Service (2023) suggested digital online portals were also proving to be difficult to use by stakeholders in both programmes, namely in project applications phase and also in project reporting phase. The Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 ICT tools are also recognised as still being problematic, with improper functioning of the Beneficiary Module, the Project Management Module, and the Online Language Support system increasing workload of beneficiaries and even discouraging newcomers and small-scale organisations. This has been recognised by the directors of the National Agencies in their contribution to the evaluation efforts of the current Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes 2021-2027 (European Union 2024:2) and by the European Parliament (Committee on Culture and Education 2023b, European Parliament 2024). Within the European Solidarity Corps 2021-2027, both the National Agencies and the beneficiaries have criticised the state of these ICT tools. Specifically, the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) system is seen as insufficient in both quantity and quality of provided language courses, and other online systems (PASS, the Beneficiary Module, etc.) do not offer sufficient functionalities and are experiencing technical issues (Committee on Culture and Education 2023a).

9 For more information, please see the official website: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/quality-label_en

Administrative and technical barriers

The results in this research indicate that many of the administrative and technical issues with the EU Youth Programmes are still present, creating barriers for youth civil society organisations to access and implement the funds. The research broadly supports the previous literature above. Participants in the interviews and focus groups identified two main challenges faced by the organisation with regards to European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ grants: the overly complicated application process, and the grant size, and format.

Participants said that applications were too time consuming, being overly restrictive with word or page limits, and oftentimes not commensurate with the grant size. They described how grants for hundreds of thousands of euros would require the same application process for grants that were much smaller. Despite the info days and platforms created by the European Commission and National Agencies to advise the application process, some participants still felt that they sometimes lacked the information and support to complete applications properly. With regard to grant structure, participants described how most grants typically do not allow for flexibility. They agreed that lump sum formats are simpler to implement and help give the needed flexibility for organisations to carry out their programmes. However lump sums are not used in all grant forms provided. Even when they are provided, they often still require a report on every single cost, creating an unnecessary bureaucratic burden on youth organisations that may already be struggling with capacity.

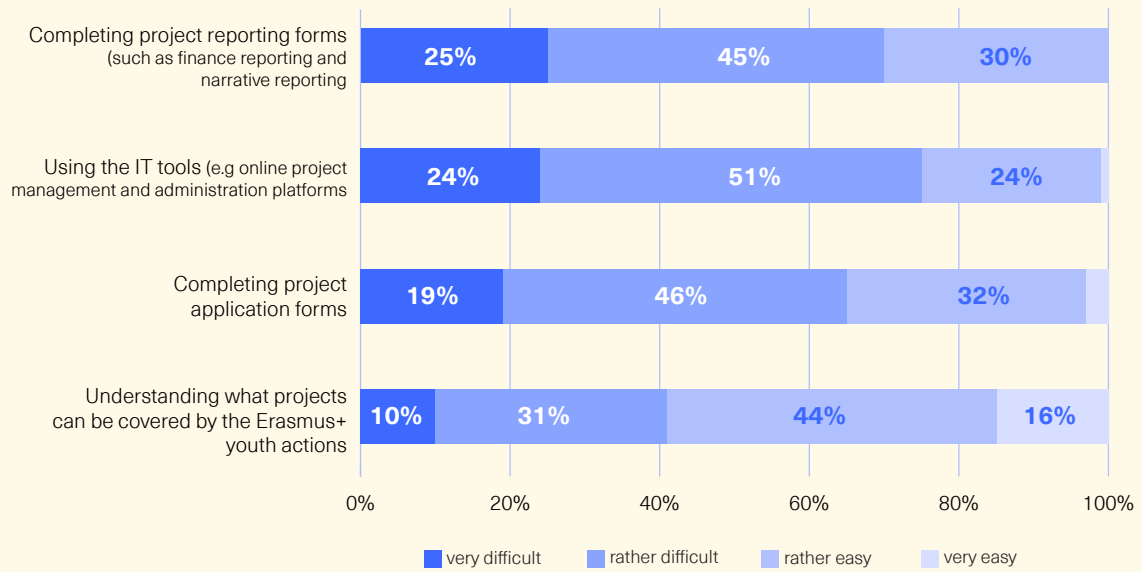
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'We need the funding applications to be simpler. If the issue is around governance and compliance, it can be smaller funds, to at least get that initial engagement with new applicants.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

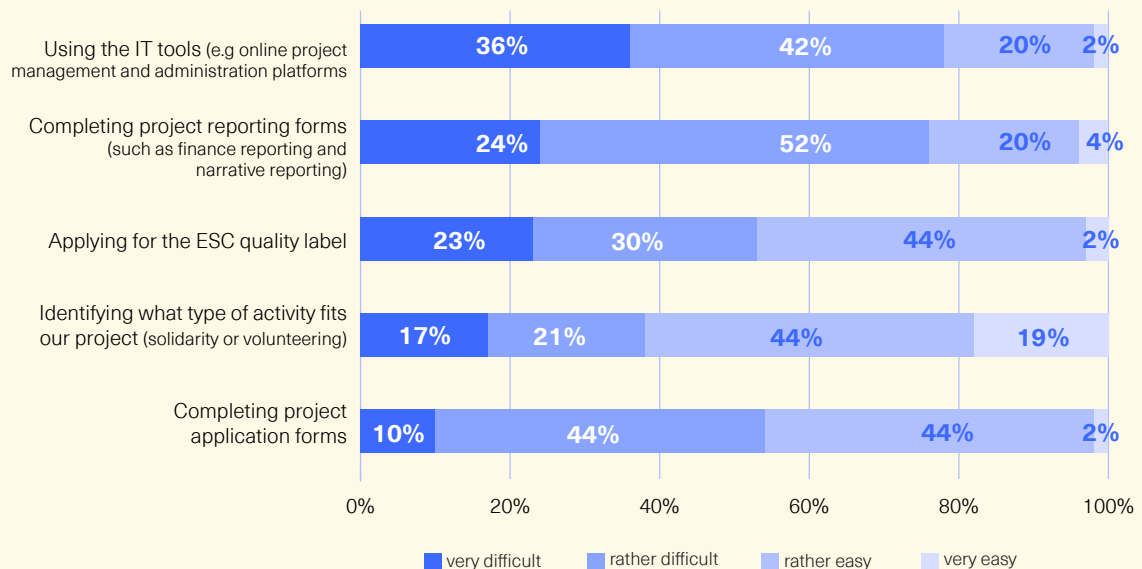
These findings were further supported by the survey. Here, respondents find most of the project management related activities within the Erasmus+ youth chapter actions difficult (Graph 5.1a). Project reporting and ICT tools are rated as the most difficult to deal with, as about quarter of the representatives of the youth organisations find these very difficult and another about half of them find these rather difficult. Project application forms are rated only slightly less negatively than the previous two areas, with two thirds of the youth organisations scoring on the negative side of the scale. Correctly understanding which projects can be covered by which actions within the Erasmus+ youth is seen as easier than the previous areas, however, over 40% of organisations still find this difficult.

Graph 5.1a: When involved in grants from Erasmus+ youth actions, how demanding is the following for your organisation?



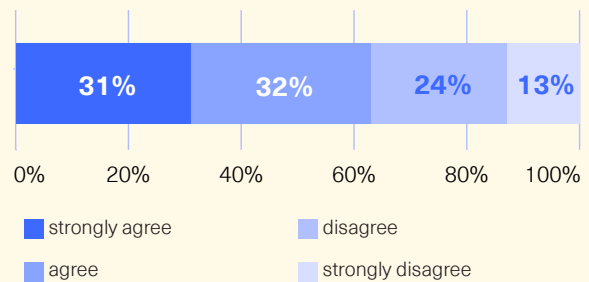
Similarly, the surveyed organisations were given a chance to rate the difficulty of the European Solidarity Corps Programme in various areas (Graph 5.1b). Using ICT tools and project reporting are, again, seen as the most difficult tasks, rated negatively by almost 80% of representatives of youth organisations. Applying for the European Solidarity Corps quality label and project applications themselves are the second most demanding area, with over 50% of organisations scoring at the negative end of the scale. And while identifying which projects can be funded through which European Solidarity Corps activities are seen as least problematic, it still is difficult for almost 40% of organisations.

Graph 5.1b: When involved in grants from ESC, how demanding is the following for your organisation?



Almost two thirds of the surveyed organisations reported experiencing delays when receiving funds from the EU Youth Programmes (Graph 5.1c). This seems to most strongly affect organisations operating at international level, where 85% of organisations agreed or strongly agreed they had experienced delays, substantially higher than the overall trend of 63%. It is possible that these international organisations are more likely to be referring to centralised grants managed by EACEA as these grants are typically more suited to pan-European projects.

Graph 5.1c: My organisation has experienced delays when receiving project funds from the EU Youth programmes



Impact of technical barriers on different types of youth civil society organisations

Participants within the focus groups and interviews identified as many youth civil society organisations are youth- or volunteer-led, their organisations lacked the skills and know-how and time to develop applications. It was stated that youth-led and grassroots organisations are disadvantaged in their ability to adequately compete for grants, as the process, size, and format favours larger, more formalised or professionalised organisations. The grant application and management process were said to pose challenges for volunteers, or young people who are early in their careers in NGO management. Interviewees contrasted the different level of challenge when applying faced by organisations run ‘for’ young people, which had experienced professionally qualified staff able to cope with complex grants application, compared to organisations run ‘by’ young people, whose staff and volunteers generally had limited experience and were new to applying for grants in general.

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‘The [application] questions are very helpful in terms of making sure you’ve thought of what you need for a quality project. However, sometimes it feels like you have to have already done the project to complete it. I think they are overly long and complicated.’

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

‘I think Erasmus+ funding is going in the right direction – administrative-wise, it’s getting less and less. But I think more about the discrepancy between volunteer-based organisations and non-volunteer based. Some administration is much easier if you have a huge staff.’

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

This issue was said to be particularly acute for organisations that work with young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO) and are run by YPFO themselves. As such, the complexity of applications and the high administrative burden was described as being even higher for these organisations, which were said to be less likely to have professionalised staff, and/or would be composed of individuals for whom volunteering and working for free was already an additional challenge. In the view of participants, organisations who are staffed with volunteers who are YPFO already face obstacles and cannot work for free for long periods. Therefore, time-consuming application processes are even more onerous for these populations

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'Underprivileged groups do not have the privilege to work half a year in advance for free [to prepare a grant application]'

— YPFO Focus Group participant

'The compliance and the application expectations are really high. That is then on the ground, this a barrier to participation. Especially for marginalised young people, and in the youth work sector, which is not well resourced, and which rely on a lot of volunteers.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

Overall, there was a sense amongst organisations interviewed that, to youth organisations, applying was a highly technical process, which gave advantages to highly professionalised organisations with experienced staff and a disadvantage to young people with less experience. This included both the application process, but also in dealing with the National Agency after receiving a grant.

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'With Erasmus+, you need people with knowledge on how to write the grants, and if you don't have this, you're unlikely to get it.'

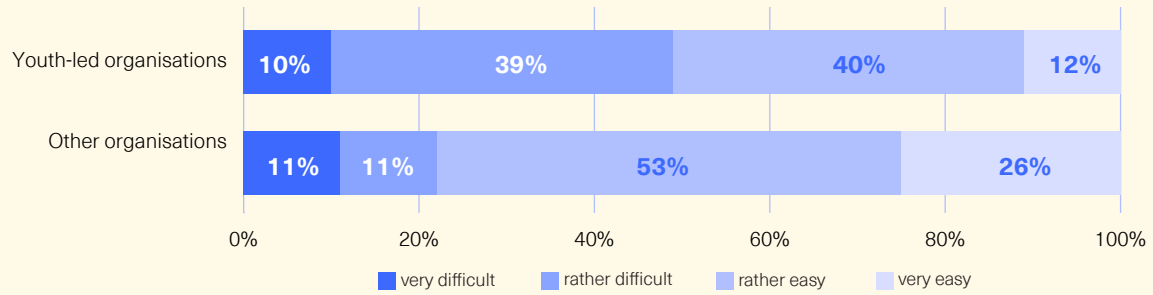
— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

'[National Agencies] stress that “we are the ruler; we are judging you”. Everyone comments how the emails are strict and quite scary. When you get this, and you are a young person - you have to be bold in your communication [with National Agencies]. You have to already have the right knowledge and skills to deal with them'

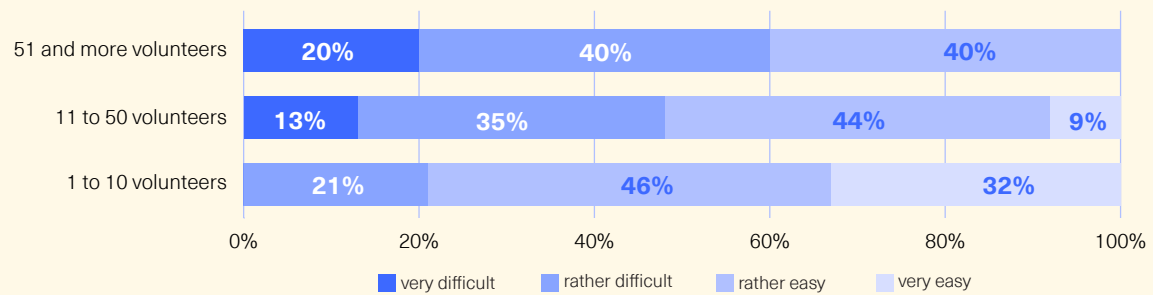
— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

Survey findings support the idea that organisations which are youth-led, or utilising a large number of volunteers experience more barriers when applying to the EU Youth Programmes than other organisations. Understanding what projects can be covered by which Erasmus+ youth chapter actions seem to be easier for organisations with lower numbers of volunteers, and for organisations that are not youth-led. Completing project application forms in Erasmus+ youth chapter actions seem to be easier for organisations with less volunteers, and for those organisations which are not youth-led. Organisations with fewer volunteers also find project reporting in Erasmus+ youth chapter actions easier (Graphs 5.2a - 5.2e).

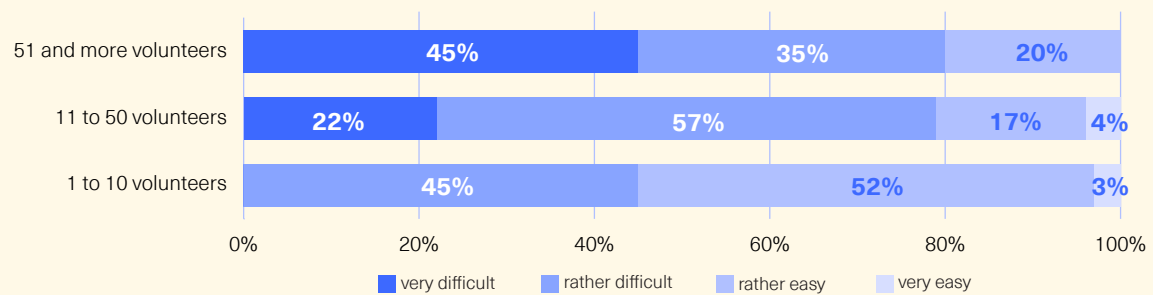
Graph 5.2a: When involved in grants from E+ Youth actions, how demanding for your organisations is understanding what can be covered by Erasmus+ youth actions? (response from youth-led organisation)



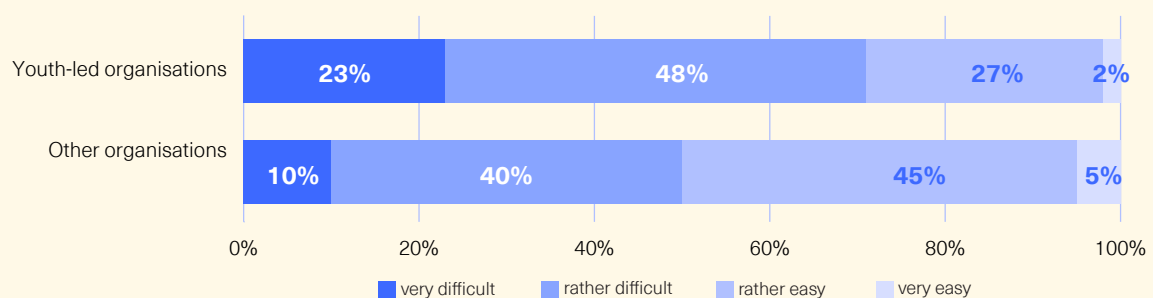
Graph 5.2b: When involved in grants from Erasmus+ youth actions, how demanding for your organisations is understanding what can be covered by Erasmus+ youth actions? (response by number of organisation volunteers)



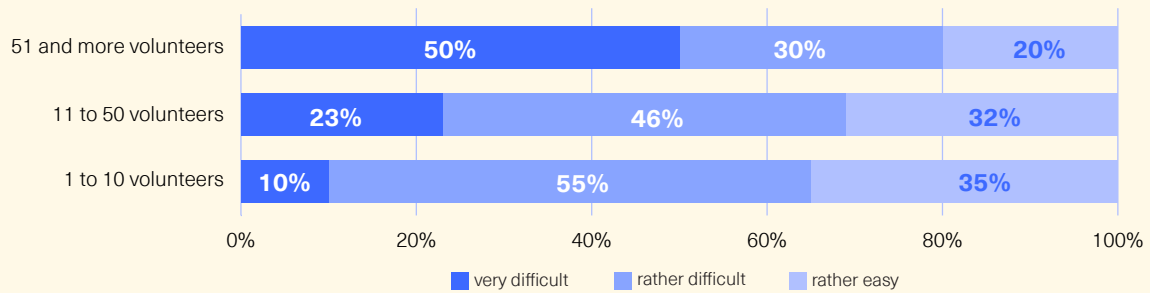
Graph 5.2c: When involved in grants from Erasmus+ youth actions, how demanding for your organisations is completing project application forms? (response by number of organisation volunteers)



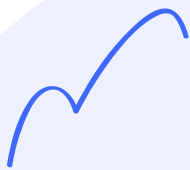
Graph 5.2d: When involved in grants from Erasmus+ youth actions, how demanding for your organisations is completing project application forms? (response by youth-led organisations)



Graph 5.2e: When involved in grants from Erasmus+ youth actions, how demanding for your organisations is: completing reporting forms? (response by number of organisation volunteers)



In the focus groups, INGYOs raised specific concerns about the youth operating grants managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency. They expressed that as the grant applications are structured in a way which makes them feel pressured to present the operations of their organisation as an ‘action plan’ or a project-based grant. This was said to make it challenging to describe and demonstrate the value of the work of their as organisations effectively. ‘Action plan’ style approaches require INGYOs to orient the grant towards delivery of project-related goals, rather than the more fundamental operations of their organisation. In INGYOs view, the health and operational capacity of an organisation should be just as important as the projects that it carries out. Ultimately, the more sustainable the operations of the organisation, the better quality the projects, and the more able youth organisations are to carry out the goals of the EU.





Chapter summary

The administrative and technical barriers within the programmes are widely established, and this research suggests that they are still present, and have a substantial impact on the ability of youth civil society organisations to effectively engage with the programmes. The burdens of working with ineffective ICT tools, complex administrative procedures and reporting, and general understanding of the programmes continue to present challenges for youth civil society when attempting to access grants. Delays in the receipt of grant funding is also particularly significant for small organisations which may have limited cash flow.

Most importantly within this research, it can be seen that these barriers have a higher impact on youth-led and volunteer focused organisations. The research strongly supports European Parliaments (2024: para 29 and 36) concerns that complicated administrative processes represented a considerable obstacle for newcomers and small-scale organisations. From this research, it can be understood that the complexity of working with EU Youth Programmes favours professionalised, well-staffed organisations rather than those that might be volunteer-led. Youth civil society organisations with a higher number of volunteers find it harder to understand the programmes, as well as complete applications and reporting. There is also some evidence to suggest that organisations led by young people with fewer opportunities are particularly affected by technical and administrative barriers within the programme. Young people with fewer opportunities, are by definition, likely to be experiencing challenges in day-to-day life, and simply have less capacity to commit the time needed as a volunteer to develop a grant application effectively.

06

Ability of the EU Youth Programmes to enable youth civil society to engage with young people with fewer opportunities

From the historical perspective, within the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 11.5% of participants in all fields were young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO), with the youth field activities being *'the most successful in this regard, reaching out to young people with fewer opportunities (31% of beneficiaries) by applying inclusive, non-formal learning approaches.'* (European Commission 2018:7)

Despite this achievement, one of the key challenges for the future programmes (i.e., for the current generation of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps) identified by the European Commission (2018:15) was inclusion. Inclusion was to be boosted by supporting participation of young people with fewer opportunities, but also by simplifying access to the programmes and thus broadening societal participation.

In line with these recommendations, one of the specific objectives of the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027 is *'to provide young people, including those with fewer opportunities, with easily accessible opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities that induce positive societal changes in the Union and beyond, while improving and properly validating their competences, as well as facilitating their continuous engagement as active citizens.'* (Committee on Culture and Education 2023a) This has been further underlined when the European Commission (DG EAC 2021) adopted an Implementing Decision of 22 October 2021 on the framework of inclusion measures of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes 2021-2027.

In practical terms, the Implementing Decision states that, among other measures, young people with fewer opportunities should be able to receive specific support before, during and after their participation, organisations should be supported in developing capacity to support inclusive approaches, financial support should be available both for the young people with fewer opportunities and for organisations that engage them, and training activities should be

available to organisations working with young people with fewer opportunities.

Furthermore, the Council of the European Union (2022: para 4) states that it is key to develop the European Solidarity Corps Programme in such a way as to *'ensure that access to transnational volunteering activities is a realistic opportunity for all young people, including those with fewer opportunities.'* The Council suggested that numerous measures should be taken, for example: creation of information infrastructure accessible to young people with fewer opportunities, promotion and outreach towards young people with fewer opportunities, support for organisers of volunteering activities (e.g., in provision of appropriate accommodation, in cooperation with external experts, etc.), or visa obtainment support.

Recent figures show that in case of the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027, the share of participating young people with fewer opportunities was 35% in 2021 and 2022 (Committee on Culture and Education 2023a¹⁰). Available data show that while Erasmus+ 2021-2027 KA1 mobilities in 2022 included about 15% of young people with fewer opportunities generally, in the field of youth the inclusion rate was 27%, making the youth field mobility activities in 2022 almost twice as inclusive as general Erasmus+ activities in that year, and much more inclusive than mobilities in any other field in that year (7% in Adult Education, 13% in Higher Education, 3% in School Education, and 14% in Vocational Education and Training)¹¹.

10 Further data on European Solidarity Corps performance can be found at https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en

11 Calculations are based on datasets available at https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/factsheets-statistics-evaluations/statistics/for-researchers?facets_permanent%7Cfield_eac_topics=1998

The European Parliament (2024: para 27) underlines that inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 is still a challenge, when it recognizes that *'many young people with fewer opportunities are kept from spending longer periods of time abroad by financial or other obstacles.'* Among the suggestions to improve the situation, the European Parliament lists *'an increase in the upfront payments for beneficiaries with fewer opportunities and to provide beneficiaries with timely payments'* (ibid: para 65), as well as setting up a communications, outreach, and visibility strategies to enhance awareness of Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 (ibid: paras 89, 93, 100), and finally also stresses the need to collect data on inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities (ibid: para 62).

Furthermore, the Committee on Culture and Education (2023b) believes that 'the single biggest barrier to achieving inclusion is the insufficient level of grants provided. Strategies need to be further developed to ensure that underrepresented groups, including individuals with disabilities and those coming from marginalised communities, have effective access to Erasmus+ opportunities'. This is in line with findings from the RAY CAP research (Bammer et al. 2019:60) which concludes that youth workers would like to engage young people in all parts of the process, from project idea, through writing of the application,

all the way to implementation, but time and financial restraints limit opportunities for implementing this holistic inclusion approach.

The publication above demonstrates that inclusion is both a priority, and a work in progress for the EU Youth Programmes. However, they consider the programmes either from the perspective of all fields (i.e. education and training, sport, and youth) or the youth sector as a whole. Youth-led organisations and youth civil society have a vital role to play in the inclusion agenda. Civil society organisations can contribute to social cohesion. Civil society organisations can amplify the voices of minority and other at-risk groups by raising the visibility of the key issues they may confront. Youth civil society organisations are particularly important, as these organisations target youth-specific issues, place issues on the policy and political agenda (Deželan and Yurttagüler n.d.). To that end, understanding the way in which the EU Youth Programmes enable youth civil society to engage with young people with fewer opportunities is vital.

Research results

Interviewees and focus group participants within this research welcomed the EU Youth Programmes' emphasis on inclusion, and that National Agencies in particular appear to have resources and knowledge on how to work on inclusion. They cited RAY research (e.g., Mayers et al. 2020) that demonstrates the positive influence of the EU Youth Programmes on inclusion and diversity.

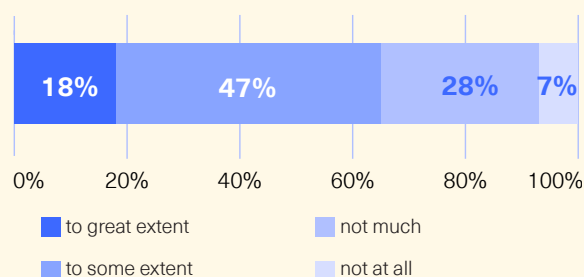


'Inclusion and diversity are the mainstay of the values of what the European programmes are all about.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council

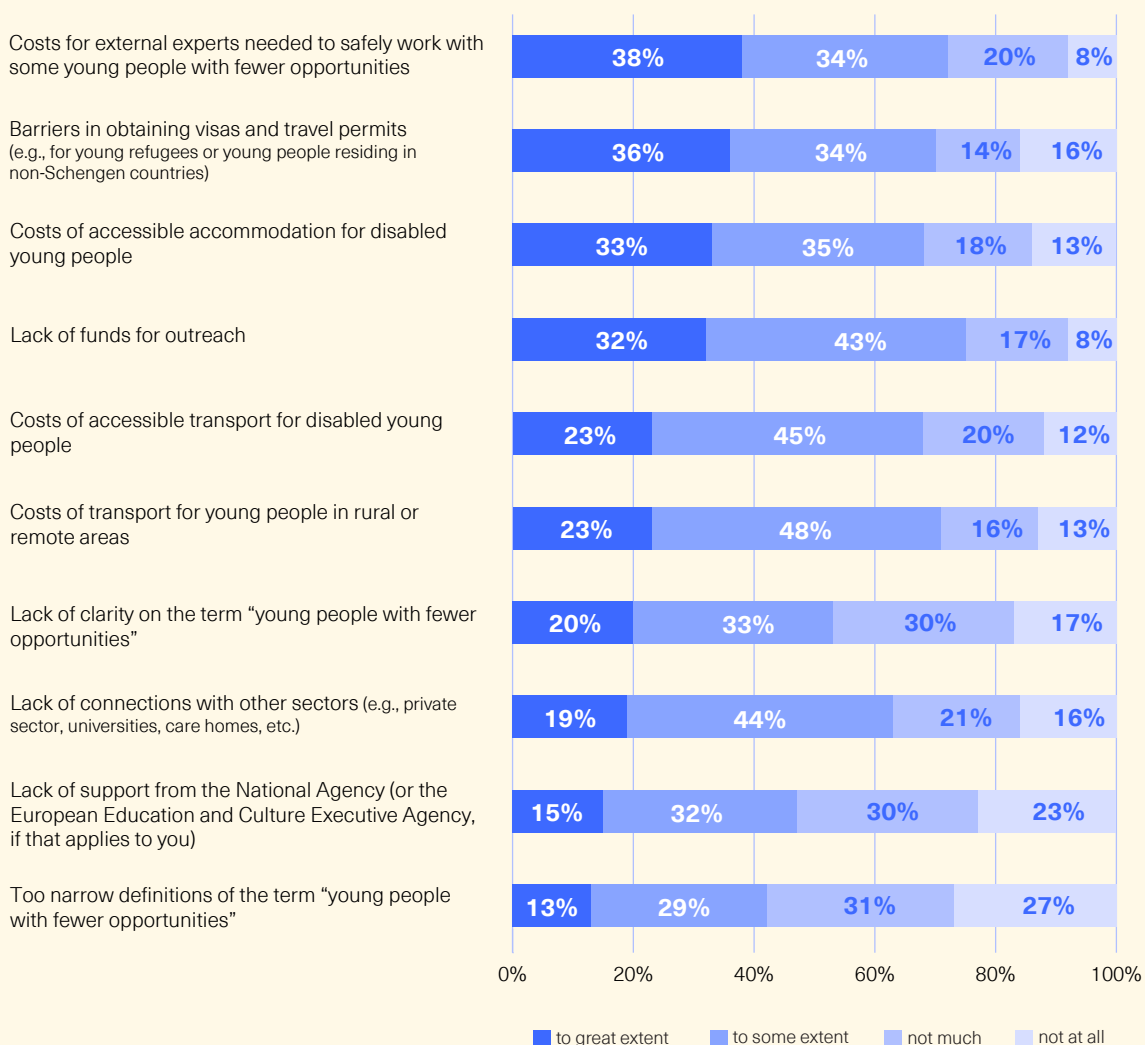
Nevertheless, it was clear across the research that there is still some distance to go in terms of the programme's ability to support the engagement of YPFO with youth civil society. Supporting the concerns identified by Committee on Culture and Education (2023b) above, over one third of surveyed organisations feel that funds available through EU Youth Programmes do not allow them to support young people with fewer opportunities much or at all, and another almost half of them feel the funds allow them to support young people with fewer opportunities only to some extent (Graph 6.1a).

Graph 6.1a: To what extent the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to cover support for YPFO?



When asked about hurdles to inclusion of YPFO in EU Youth Programmes (Graph 6.1b), 30% to 40% of surveyed organisations agreed on four key barriers: costs of external experts needed to safely work with some YPFO, obtaining visas and permits, costs of accommodation accessible to disabled young people, and lack of funds for outreach. Costs of accessible transport for disabled young people as well as costs of transport for rural youth are also worth mentioning as barriers stressed by the youth organisations, with almost 50% of youth organisations stating they are to some extent barriers, and another 23% seeing them as barriers to a great extent. Moreover, the results show that all of the listed hurdles are seen as substantive

Graph 6.1b: To what extent do the following barriers prevent your organisation from involving YPFO in EU Youth Programme funded projects?



barriers to inclusion of YPFO in EU Youth Programmes, identifying room for improvement in all areas.

Within the interviews and focus groups, organisations working specifically with YPFO described mostly challenges when attempting to engage young people in the EU Youth Programmes. As well as the general insufficiency of funding to meet costs of supporting YPFO, they identified how the financial structures of the programmes were simply not designed with specific YPFO needs in mind. For example, the programmes did not take into account that many YPFO would not be able to afford all their day-to-day costs once they travelled to a new destination. Some organisations working with YPFO have also described how the programme reimbursement structures can lead to unforeseen costs relating to participants dropping out of activities. Travel

costs can only be reimbursed if 80% of the activity was completed, however there is a higher risk of this happening when participants have disabilities, chronic health conditions, or exclusion factors in their life that may prevent sustained participation. When this occurs, the grant beneficiary is left to cover the costs. Furthermore, interviewees described how reimbursement for projects funded through the programme would sometimes take over three months, which can be untenable for many grassroots organisations and create cash flow challenges

In relation to participants from non-Schengen countries, participants in the focus groups described how lengthy and/or restrictive visa procedures greatly hinder their mobility projects. Costs related to visas, such as visa appointments, increase overall project costs, as do unforeseen circumstances, such as troubles at border crossing, and travel costs cannot be reimbursed. In particular, for mobility participants coming from countries affected by conflict or war, closed borders often mean more expensive travel, less opportunities for green travel (as trains are no longer an option), and no embassies inside the country, meaning more costs spent towards private visa centres. However, in many instances, focus group participants described scenarios where participants in mobility projects, or even staff or members of partner organisations, simply have their visas rejected. This supports the concerns of the Committee on Culture and Education (2023a) that in case of the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027, the absence of financial and legal assistance for visa acquisition with are one of key obstacles, namely in case of young people from non-Schengen countries, including refugees creating potential obstacles for programme engagement of organisations working with these target groups.

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'There are millions of refugee youth in Europe that don't have national ID cards, and they cannot take part in international exchanges. Excluding this population is like the equivalent of excluding all of Belgium, or the Netherlands, from Erasmus+.'

— YPFO Focus Group participant

Focus group participants working with YPFOs also described how the commission itself was not very inclusive in its own practices. For example, one participant cited how info days do not have sign-language interpretation, meaning that YPFO with hearing disabilities would not have access to this information. This added to the obstacles that organisations of YPFO already face when navigating the complex system of the EU Youth Programme.

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'The Commission itself is not inclusive. Info days don't provide sign-language interpretation, which meant that [a youth CSOs supporting deaf youth] didn't have access to the information.'

— YPFO Focus Group participant

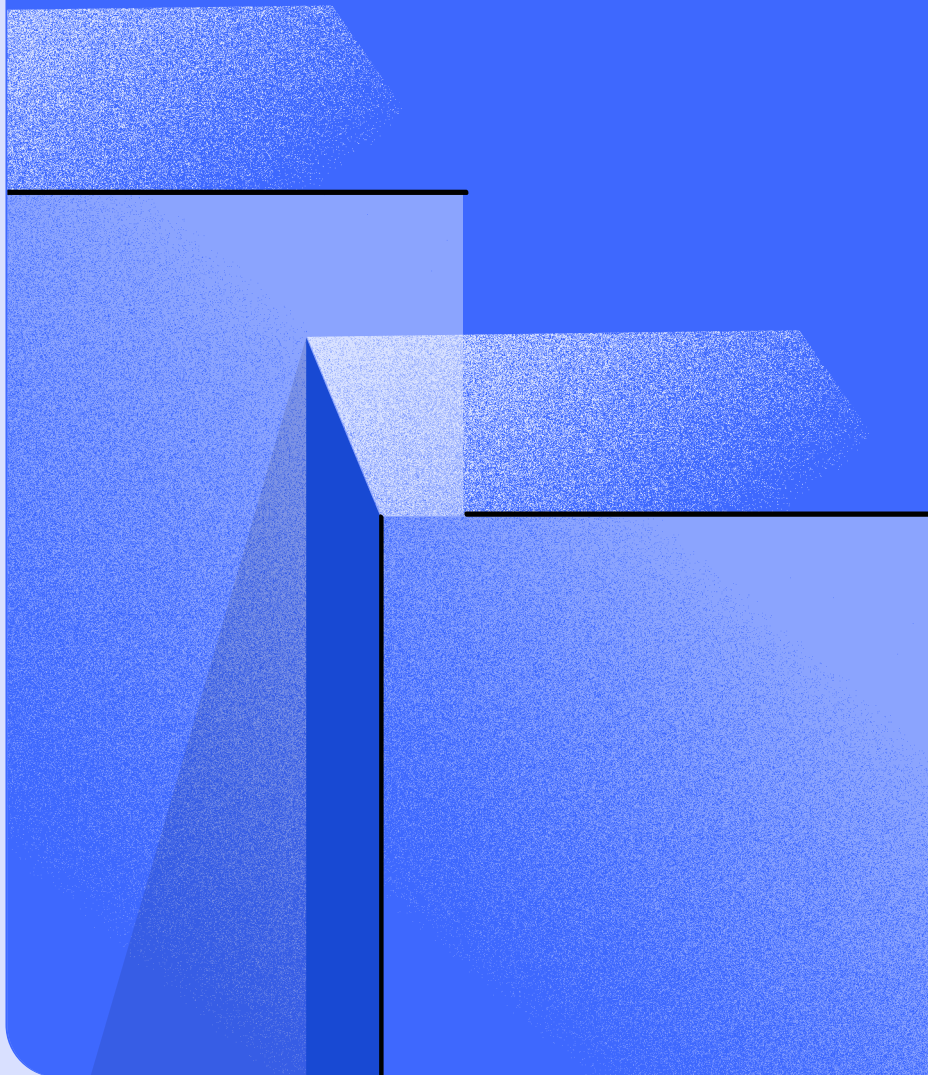
Interviewees from National Youth Councils also described how member organisations that work with YPFO were often not as heavily staffed and professionalised as large, other organisations, and therefore would have additional challenges when dealing with the complex application process within the programmes (see Chapter 4 for findings on additional barriers for volunteer focused organisations accessing grants).

Across the focus groups and interviews, it was generally emphasised that youth organisations as a whole would benefit from more support on outreach to YPFO, and that was a greater need for outreach from grant makers to organisation working with YPFO`

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'You can't just increase project funding without increasing resources to the National Agencies, so that they have opportunities to really engage with the most marginalised organisations, that work with the most vulnerable young people. It takes a lot of time and energy to do so.'

— Interviewee from a National Youth Council



Chapter summary

Whilst youth civil society clearly welcomes the emphasis on inclusion within the EU Youth Programmes, over one third of surveyed organisations feel that funds available through EU do not allow them to support young people with fewer opportunities much or at all. They identify barriers in many domains including, costs of external experts needed to safely work with some YPFO, obtaining visas and permits, costs of accommodation and transport accessible to disabled young people, lack of funds for outreach as well as costs of transport for rural youth. Broadly speaking it seems the challenges relating to inclusion identified across the programmes as a whole are no less felt by youth civil society.

Youth organisations which are led by YPFO are facing two layers of disadvantage when accessing the programmes. Firstly, the financial structure of programmes may not fully meet the needs of their participants, and secondly, as volunteer-led organisations, it may also be harder for them to engage in the application process (see Chapter 5). This twofold effect may make the programmes harder for young people with fewer opportunities to use the programmes and thus misses an opportunity to enable the civic space of young people.

Focus group participants from organisations working with YPFO, were keen to place challenges following their experiences utilising the programmes within a wider context they faced in accessing funding from any source and democratic backsliding within Europe. For them, obstacles to funding for their organisation posed long-term risks for YPFOs, for their ability to safeguard their rights, and for European values in general. They described how they viewed political parties were taking a rightward turn in Europe, risking that organisations working with YPFO would get any funding from national sources if such parties were to take power in the future. Therefore, it became even more important that obstacles to funding YPFO organisations within the EU Youth Programmes would

be reduced now, to allow them to fight for their rights and hopefully prevent a further rightward, xenophobic shift at the European level. This speaks to previous research by the European Youth Forum (Deželan et al. 2000) which indicates that 17.4% of youth organisations perceive members of ethnic, sexual, religious and cultural minorities are now largely or completely marginalised from civic space. Work by CIVICUS (2022) has also further demonstrated a trend of global authoritarian backlash against civil society and human rights defenders, characterised by funding and administrative restrictions as well as other direct threats and persecutions.

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'Underprivileged groups are in danger of far-right parties getting into power. If they do, they will not give us funds, will not vote in favour of refugees, of sexual minorities, of Roma. These are the future problems we will have to face. But today, how will we represent our interests, before this happens? For this we need funding.'

— YPFO Focus Group participant

07

Conclusions and opportunities for development

The ability of young people to become members of, and engage with, youth-led organisations and youth civil society organisations is a cornerstone of young people's rights to freedom of association and assembly. The existence of a healthy civil society and civic space is vital to any democracy, and fostering young people's democratic participation is a fundamental element of the EU Youth Strategy and the EU Youth Programmes.

This research supports the already well-established potential of the EU Youth Programmes to promote young engagement in civil society where it is known over half (53.9%) of participants in Erasmus + youth chapter projects are more likely to engage with civil society after the project, and 90% of participants agree or strongly agree they are better able to actively engage in civil society after the projects (Herranz et al. 2024). Similarly, in this research 95% of youth civil society organisations surveyed indicated the programmes enabled them to support young people to participate in civil society either to a great extent or to some extent. However, the research demonstrates that, in the view of youth civil society, programme grants are primarily effective at supporting participant's learning (both young people and youth workers) and much less effective at supporting the longer-term development of youth civil society. **That is to say the programmes are good at building young people's capacity to engage with civil society, but weak at ensuring a healthy youth civic space is available to them.**

This can be seen across the research in a number of ways:

1. Financial limitations within grants

Echoing concerns of the European Parliament (2024) about three quarters of youth civil society organisations now think that the funds available through the EU Youth Programmes is insufficient in keeping up with increasing prices, such as inflation or rent increases. This is especially felt in the area of costs of staff working with young people as well as costs of administrative and managerial staff, and therefore impacts substantially on the ability of organisations to sustain their workforce. Furthermore, over one third of surveyed organisations feel that funds available through the EU do not allow them to support young people with fewer opportunities much or at all. As a result, the programme made the civic space less accessible to young people with fewer opportunities, than their counterparts.

2. Allocation of grants to youth organisations

Whilst the budget for the EU Youth Programmes, and number of grant's overall has increased, youth related civil society organisation and youth organisations are not benefiting from this increases in the same way as other types of organisations:

- The proportion of Erasmus+ youth grants (KA1 and KA2 combined) being awarded to youth-related civil society organisations is decreasing year on year. Less than 1 in 10 Erasmus+ youth grants (KA1 and KA2 combined) are awarded to youth organisations.
- The proportion of European Solidarity Corps Solidarity and Volunteering grants made to youth-related civil society organisations has declined strongly over the years. In 2021 around three quarters of all Solidarity and Volunteering grants were awarded to this type of organisation, by 2023 this had fallen to two thirds.
- The proportion of European Solidarity Corps Solidarity and Volunteering grants made to youth organisations has remained consistently low over the years. Just over 1 in 20 grants are made to youth organisations.

3. Reduced access grants to support longer term development

There has been a general shift in the Erasmus+ Programme budgets away from KA2 grants which are designed to support longer term organisational partnerships, and towards KA1 projects which focus on mobility of individuals. As a result, despite the overall Erasmus+ budget increase no notable increases are seen in the amount of KA2 grants awarded to youth related civil society and youth organisations. The proportion of Erasmus+ KA2 Youth awarded to both youth-related civil society organisations and youth organisations shows a downward trend when considered as a proportion of all KA1 and KA2 Youth grants made through the programme. Alongside this, European Youth Together grants, intended to support transnational partnerships for youth organisations have been increasingly awarded to organisations with a limited scope on youth (European Youth Forum, 2024). As a result, the programmes are increasingly limiting the access that youth civil society organisations have to access funding which supports their longer-term development, and ability to develop international networks and partnerships at a structural level.

Importantly, this research also identifies that many of the challenges and the benefits of the EU Youth Programmes, are not experienced in the same way by all parts of youth civil society. The findings indicate that youth civil society organisations with larger numbers of volunteers had particularly distinct experiences.

Youth civil society organisations with higher numbers of volunteers were less likely to identify that the programmes better enable them to deliver projects to young people, improve the quality of youth work, provide training for youth workers and youth leaders, and reach young people with fewer opportunities. They find the programmes more lacking in flexibility, and generally view the programmes as less effective at strengthening youth-led civil society as a whole. Youth civil society organisations with a higher number of volunteers also find it harder to find it harder to understand the programmes, complete applications and reporting and were less likely to say that programme grants allowed them to effectively cover staff costs.

The administrative and technical barriers within the programmes are already widely established. The burdens of working with ineffective ICT tools, complex administrative procedures and reporting, and general understanding of the programmes continue to present challenges for youth civil society when attempting to access grants. From this research, it can be understood that the complexity of working with EU Youth Programmes now favours professionalised, well-staffed organisations rather than those that might be volunteer-led. It is simply more challenging for many small volunteer organisations to engage effectively with the programmes. This is an important finding when it is considered that youth-led organisations are often volunteer-led, particularly at local and grassroots levels. It supports concerns of the European Parliament (2024) that there may be significantly fewer successful applications from youth and volunteer-led organisations and that complicated administrative processes represented a considerable obstacle for small-scale organisations.

The emphasis on inclusion within the programmes is welcome by youth civil society. This research supports previous publications identifying that there is still further work required to make the programmes fully accessible to young people with fewer opportunities, especially in ensuring that grants amounts can fully

meet the needs and support costs of participants with fewer opportunities (e.g., accessible travel and accommodation for people with disabilities, visa related costs etc.). There is also some evidence to suggest that youth organisations which are led by young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO) may potentially be facing two layers of disadvantage when accessing the programmes. Firstly, the financial structure of programmes may not fully meet the needs of their participants, and secondly, as volunteer-led organisations, it may also be harder for them to engage in the application process. Young people with fewer opportunities, are by definition, likely to be experiencing challenges in day-to-day life, and simply have less capacity to commit the time needed as a volunteer to develop a grant application effectively. Addressing these issues are particularly important to ensure that the programmes create the same opportunities for young people with fewer opportunities to become part of civil society as they do for other young people.

Whilst relationships between youth civil society and grant makers (such as National Agencies) are generally positive, half of surveyed organisations state that grant makers do not have a good understanding of youth-led organisations. Results also suggest that youth-led organisations and organisations with larger numbers of volunteers may have somewhat of a worse relationship with grant makers than other types of youth civil society. Some of these factors might be contributing to concerns about lack of transparency within grant decisions.

A final technical, but crucial finding from this research is the lack of clear organisational definitions within the two programmes. A clear and accurate definition of the term 'youth organisation' which emphasises that youth organisations are youth-led and not for profit is absent from programme documentation. This impacts on stakeholders' understanding of the extent to which grants are being used to support youth organisations and youth civil society and would be necessary to resolve to inform conversations of this nature going forward.

Recommendations

Participants in this research imagined that the future EU Youth Programmes could play a role in safeguarding independent youth organisations, by creating channels for direct funding to these organisations that enabled them to develop their longer-term capacity and functioning as well as just supporting the delivery of projects to young people. Within the context of democratic backsliding, the shrinking civil space of young people is becoming an ever-increasing concern (Deželan & Yurttagüler: n.d.) and there are decreases in civic freedoms of young people over the last decade, including their freedom of association and assembly (European Youth Forum 2023). If the EU Youth Programmes are to achieve their aims of fostering democracy within Europe, support is vital not just for young people to engage in civil society, but to ensure that a healthy civil society exists for them to engage with.

Increasing the extent to which the EU Youth Programmes are accessed by youth civil society and youth organisation is central to this. A significant increase in the Erasmus+ Programme budget for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework period, with emphasis on the youth elements of this budget and in relation to the European Solidarity Corps, would of course enhance the over funds available to youth organisations and youth civil society.

However, it is crucial to ensure that any such increases will be accompanied by measures to ensure funding is strongly directed towards youth civil society and youth organisations, as there is evidence, they have not benefited from previous budget increases as much as other organisations. This could be achieved by:

- Promoting or prioritising youth-led organisations within grant decisions. For instance by setting specific grant actions as being limited to youth-led organisations or youth civil society, awarding bonus points based on organisational status when individual grant applications are assessed, including the contribution of applicant organisations to the youth work ecosystem, or setting overall quotas within national and EU grant budgets for the amount of grant funding to be awarded to youth-led organisations and youth civil society.
- Active accurate monitoring of the extent to which youth organisations and youth civil society organisations are receiving grants, at both national and European level, accompanied by proactive outreach when shortfalls are identified.
- Ensuring that one of the requirements to hire independent experts assessing Erasmus+ grants in the field of youth is to have experience within the youth sector.
- Implementing common training for experts to ensure understanding of the youth field as well as fairness and quality in project evaluation processes.
- The inclusion of a more prominent youth chapter of the Erasmus+ Programme in its upcoming iteration.
- Significantly increasing the budget of the Erasmus+ Programme and ensuring that such increase is proportional for the youth chapter
- Clearly defining 'youth organisations' and 'youth civil society' within the framework of the EU Youth Programmes, using internationally accepted definitions such as those produced by Council of Europe.

The type and nature of grant funding is also significant. Programmes grants need to not only become more effective at covering the costs of projects they resource, but they need also to deliver the financial amounts and flexibilities required to support the long-term health, sustainability, and growth of youth civil society organisations overall. This means:

- Increasing individual grant limits overall to keep better pace with inflation as well as reducing co-financing requirements.
- Increasing flexibility in how grant budgets can be used particularly in grants funded under the youth chapter of Erasmus+, for instance by widening the scope of costs that can be included - especially in relation to costs relating to young people with fewer opportunities , reducing the overall length and complexity of grant applications (especially those targeted to small and grassroots organisations) or removing double financial reporting requirements.
- Ensuring that youth civil society have good access to grant action designed to support their long-term health, staffing, and capacity. This could include measures such as establishing operating grants for youth organisations managed by National Agencies, implementing eligibility criteria for operating grants in the field of youth at centralised level that ensure they are targeted exclusively to youth civil society, establishing a dedicated annual subcall of European Youth Together specific to youth organisations or that EACEA and the National Agencies establish a minimum threshold of youth organisations accessing grants from the youth chapter of Erasmus+.
- Establishing regranting schemes in the field of youth managed by international youth organisations, to ensure easier access to Erasmus+ resources for youth organisations across Europe. These could learn from similar practices in the CERV Programme.

Recognising that many youth organisations and parts of youth civil society are often small and volunteer-led, there is also a need to reduce the administrative and technical burdens of applying for EU Youth Programme grants, to ensure that they are accessible to organisations with a less experienced, or limited staffing base. Emphasis of this might be placed on grants specifically aimed at small organisations (Such as KA2 small scale partnerships), or lower budget grants. This could be achieved by:

- Ensuring the grant applications and grant monitoring is proportional to the grant size by using simpler procedures for lower budget grants.
- Reducing the complexity of grant applications overall for grants of the youth chapter of Erasmus+.
- Improving (i.e. fixing) the ICT systems supporting the EU Youth Programmes.
- Promoting access to dedicated support for small organisations from National Agency officers.

There is a need to address concerns that some donors (EACEA and National Agencies) within the programme do not have sufficient understanding of youth-led organisation and to build on the already positive relationships many donors have with youth civil society. This could be done by:

- Establishing an Erasmus+ stakeholder group bringing together youth civil society organisations with EACEA to discuss developments in the implementation of Erasmus+ activities funded at centralised level
- Enhancing opportunities for National Youth Councils and national youth organisations to be involved in programme implementation and governance within National Agencies through dedicated advisory bodies
- Ensuring that experts assessing EU Youth Programme grants have stronger experience within the youth sector.
- Providing better quality feedback to unsuccessful applicants, promoting transparency in grant decision making.
- Improve the access to information concerning the projects receiving grants for each round, both at the level of EACEA and National Agencies

Specific steps to further promote the inclusion of young people with fewer pictures within the EU Youth Programme should include:

- Enhancing dedicated outreach and support from National Agencies to organisations led by and/or working with young people with fewer opportunities, as well as continuing to promote training and support on the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities to other youth organisations.
- Ensuring that grants are large enough and flexible enough to meet the needs of participants with fewer opportunities, recognising that inclusion requires increased and sometimes unexpected costs.
- Establishing the “EU Volunteer Status” legally recognised across all countries participating in the ESC, to facilitate cross-border solidarity, mobility of young volunteers including fast-track visa procedures or the recognition of competencies acquired through volunteering.



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