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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps and final
evaluation of the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps**

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1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The European Solidarity Corps is an EU programme that gives young people the opportunity to help build a more inclusive society, support vulnerable people and respond to societal challenges.

Launched in December 2016, the European Solidarity Corps has existed as its own EU-funded programme since October 2018¹. Since 2022, the programme has also funded volunteering projects supporting humanitarian aid operations worldwide.

The evaluations at hand have found that the European Solidarity Corps addresses European society's crucial needs, especially in fostering participation in democratic life and promoting inclusion and diversity. The programme fosters a sense of community, revitalising local initiatives and promoting a broader global perspective. Participation contributes to improved personal, professional and study skills and social and civic awareness. The programme includes young people facing a wide range of challenges and creates pan-European networks leading to long-term partnerships and relationships. The programme has high satisfaction rates among individual participants, and participating organisations can enrich their professional skills and improve their organisational effectiveness.

The main findings of the evaluation can be summarised as follows:

- The European Solidarity Corps responds effectively to the evolving needs of European society, promoting social cohesion, individual development and inclusion.
- The programme benefits individuals, organisations and communities. Participants grow personally and professionally, leading to increased civic engagement. Organisations benefit from better project management and inclusion practices, while communities experience stronger social cohesion and intercultural understanding.
- The programme is well aligned with the Commission's priorities of democratic participation, inclusion, diversity and environmental sustainability.
- Despite its remarkable efficiency, the programme faces funding constraints due to inflation and support for participants with fewer opportunities, which highlights the need for better budget alignment with the programme's ambitions.

2. PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION REPORT

In line with Article 21(2) of Regulation (EU) 2021/888 (the 'Regulation'), the European Commission carried out a mid-term evaluation of the current European Solidarity Corps programme and the final evaluation of the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme. This evaluation was supported by an external study, consultations and findings from reports submitted by Member States and third countries associated to the programme (these reports describe the programme's implementation and impact). The evaluations assessed the programme's effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and added value.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2018/1475 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 October 2018 laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps

The evaluation has confirmed the continued relevance of the programme offering volunteering opportunities in line with the Commission's political priorities for the period 2019-2024, including democratic participation, diversity, inclusion and sustainability. It has also identified some areas for improvement, including: (i) improving the identification of people with fewer opportunities to facilitate their inclusion in the programme; (ii) better aligning programme funding with its objectives; (iii) improving IT and monitoring tools; and (iv) clarifying in more detail the communication on the purpose of the humanitarian aid strand. This report presents the main evaluation findings and proposed recommendations. The accompanying staff working document gives details on the findings, consultations and methodology.

In line with the Regulation, the Commission will send the interim and final evaluation to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

The 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme

The 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps programme had a budget of EUR 375.6 million, dedicated to volunteering, solidarity projects, traineeships and jobs for young people. By the end of 2020, the programme had created opportunities for more than 35 000 young people. The programme addressed horizontal priorities, such as inclusion and climate change, and supported projects involving young people.

European Solidarity Corps outputs in 2018-2020

DESCRIPTION	2018		2019		2020	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
Total no. of participants	17 000	4 412	34 700	16 709	40 300	22 346
Volunteering projects, participants	8 400	2 694	24 600	11 735	28 900	14 009
Solidarity projects, participants	5 400	1 057	6 200	4 447	7 300	7 196
Traineeships and jobs projects, participants	3 200	139	3 900	208	4 100	503
Volunteering teams in high-priority areas, participants	-	522	-	319	-	638
Participants with fewer opportunities (%)	25%	35%	25%	42%	25%	42%

The 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme

In the 2021-2027 period related to the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the European Solidarity Corps focuses even more on volunteering and proposes humanitarian aid volunteering in non-EU countries. With a budget of EUR 1 009 million, the programme's implementation was delayed between 2021 and 2022 due to the late adoption of the Regulation in May 2021 and the post-COVID-19 effects. As a result, the performance targets

set in the Programme Performance Statement² were adjusted in 2023 from 270 000 to 185 000 participants. The programme has built on the achievements of its predecessor in its first years and on the EU Aid Volunteers initiative.

The first year of the latest MFF was challenging and complex. Along with the late adoption of the programme's regulation and work programme as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, there were unexpected and exceptional challenges in 2022 due to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the impact of rising inflation. The programme quickly adopted flexibility measures to allow projects to refocus, on a voluntary basis, parts of their activities to provide short-term support to Ukraine and its population. Inflation was also addressed through an adjustment of unit rates.

European Solidarity Corps outputs in 2021-2023

DESCRIPTION	2021		2022		2023	
	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised	Planned	Realised
Total no. of participants	25 000	18 112	27 223	25 147	25 606	20 403
Solidarity projects, participants	9 000	5 164	9 700	7 418	9 100	3 813
Volunteering projects, participants	15 000	11 648	16 200	16 016	15 200	14 404
Volunteering teams in high-priority areas, participants	1 000	1 300	1 000	1 384	1 000	1 837
Humanitarian aid volunteering, participants	0	0	323	329	306	349
Participants with fewer opportunities (%)	34%	35%	30%	35%	30%	40%
Organisations that have received a quality label for volunteering in solidarity activities	2 000	2 178	2 100	504	390	258
Organisations that have received a quality label for humanitarian aid volunteering	-	100	100	40	40	30

4. MAIN EVALUATION RESULTS

Based on the Commission's **Better Regulation Guidelines**³, the evaluation draws on the evidence provided by an external study. The period covered was 2018-2020 for the previous programme and 2021-2023 for the current one. The evaluation shows an **overall positive assessment** across all evaluation criteria and supports the continued implementation of the European Solidarity Corps.

4.1 Relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency – to what extent has the European Solidarity Corps been successful?

Relevance

The European Solidarity Corps is highly relevant to the evolving needs of European society. The programme fosters a diverse range of volunteering opportunities aligned with the

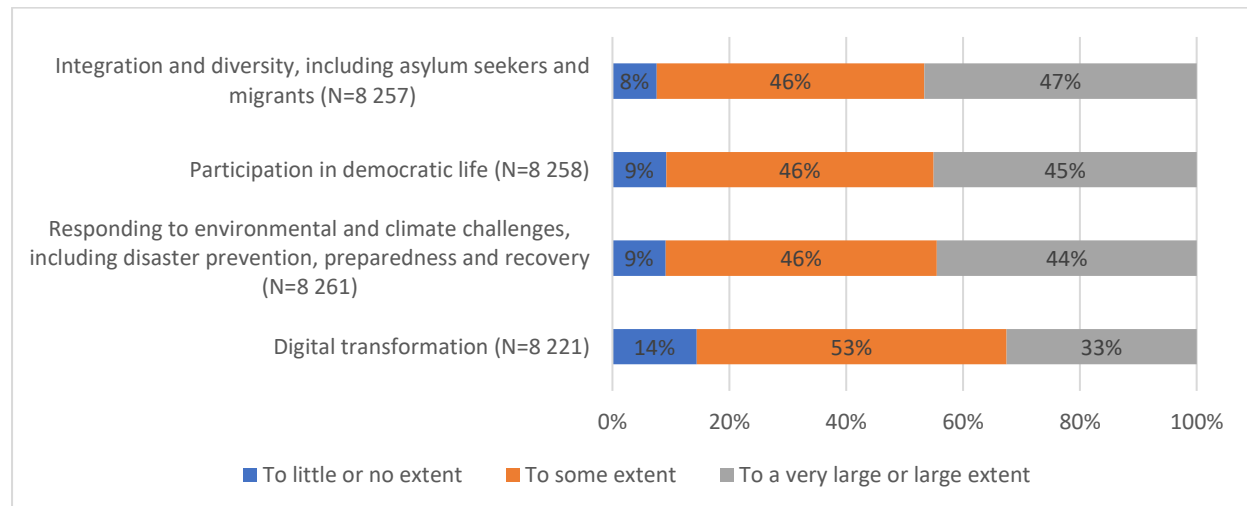
² EU (2024), European Solidarity Corps Performance, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en#mff-2014-2020--european-solidarity-corps

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation-why-and-how/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en

Commission's political priorities for the period 2019-2024, such as democratic participation, inclusion, diversity and sustainability.

The programme also demonstrates a firm commitment to adapting its priorities to meet urgent societal needs, as seen by its swift response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises. However, there is room for improvement in ensuring a balanced geographical spread of participants and expanding the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities.

Relevance of European Solidarity Corps horizontal priorities according to participants



Source: Survey of individual participants. Question 102 'The European Solidarity Corps has several priorities. In your view, to what extent do they meet the needs and expectations of society?'

Relevance

General findings

- The objectives and priorities of the European Solidarity Corps are relevant for promoting social cohesion and individual development among young people.
- The programme is highly relevant in addressing local societal needs due to its diverse formats and topics, enabling tailored projects.

Findings on the 2021-2027 programme

- The European Solidarity Corps has proved it can adapt to meet emerging societal needs such as the impact of more frequent and severe climate-related hazards and other disasters.
- Its relevance is underlined by high satisfaction rates among individual participants.
- It addresses European society's crucial needs, especially in fostering participation in democratic life and promoting inclusion and diversity.
- The programme could better meet the needs of participants from diverse backgrounds or in particular situations (such as living with a disability) by improving the identification of young people with fewer opportunities and the targeted support to them.

Coherence

The European Solidarity Corps has demonstrated strong internal and external coherence (or consistency) with the EU's strategic priorities, particularly in relation to youth engagement and the integration of other EU policy initiatives.

The programme complements EU programmes like Erasmus+, but actual synergies are somewhat limited, suggesting a need for more structured efforts. A possible integration of the European Solidarity Corps into Erasmus+ could present both opportunities and challenges. While integration could increase administrative efficiency and resource flexibility, there are concerns that it could dilute the European Solidarity Corps' unique focus on volunteering and solidarity, potentially weakening its foundational values and impact.

Externally, the European Solidarity Corps is well-aligned with other EU policy initiatives, especially those aiming to improve youth participation and democratic engagement. The benefits of this alignment could be further improved by setting up a structured cooperation from the outset of the next programme. Moreover, given the occupational benefits for vulnerable young people, the programme could be better linked with EU youth employment initiatives.

Coherence

Findings on the 2018-2020 programme

- The programme complemented EU policies and served as a single-entry point for

solidarity activities.

- Overall, it was complementary to other EU programmes, particularly Erasmus+.
- The occupational strand did not stand out as an alternative to other activities, which limited how it could complement the rest of the programme.
- The programme stood out from other programmes by offering in-country activities and group projects.

Findings on the 2021-2027 programme

- No specific inconsistencies were perceived among action types managed directly by the Commission and indirectly by National Agencies.
- Streamlining volunteering activities under the European Solidarity Corps has improved the programme's coherence.
- While integrating the programme into Erasmus+ may seem cost-effective, it could raise participation barriers and weaken the programme's distinct focus, targeted reach and impact.
- The programme highly complements the Youth Action Plan in EU external action for 2022-2027 and the Commission's broader strategic priorities for 2019-2024.
- Overall, the programme complements other EU programmes, particularly Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, but further synergies could be developed.

Effectiveness

The European Solidarity Corps strengthens social cohesion and intercultural understanding and addresses local challenges, especially in areas with declining local volunteering. The programme successfully fosters community engagement, leadership development and collaborative organisational networks. The involvement of international volunteers has been vital in remote or socio-economically disadvantaged areas, but the programme faced some organisational challenges in adapting to these areas' specific needs. Key community impacts include:

- addressing local challenges by filling volunteer gaps and improving the quality of life, particularly in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged areas; the involvement of international volunteers has been vital in these regions, fostering community spirit and addressing specific local needs;
- improving community development by strengthening social cohesion and intercultural understanding within communities; however, the programme faced challenges in remote areas.

The programme has consistently met its targets on participants with fewer opportunities⁴ (34% in 2021, and 30% each year since 2022). However, the current method of identifying them makes it difficult to assess the programme's outputs in this area.

⁴ See complete definition of young people with fewer opportunities in Article 2(4) of Regulation (EU) No 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme

The humanitarian aid strand has seen a substantial increase in interest compared with the EU Aid Volunteers initiative. More than 42 000 expressions of interest were received by May 2023, indicating a successful launch with high visibility. In total, nearly 104 000 expressions of interest were made by the end of 2023, far exceeding the initial target of 1 955 deployments for the entire 2021-2027 programming period. This suggests that the strand's current budget is insufficient for meeting this high level of demand.

Effectiveness

General findings

- Organisations recognise improvements in their project planning, implementation and reporting skills and noted the impact of the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label on their future fundraising and project delivery.
- The programme fosters a sense of community, revitalising local initiatives and promoting a broader global perspective.
- Participation contributes to strong individual-level results, such as improved personal, professional and study skills and social and civic awareness.

Findings on the 2018-2020 programme

- The European Solidarity Corps navigated through regulatory and pandemic-related challenges, gradually increasing the number of participants engaged in mobility but falling short of the targets.

Findings on the 2021-2027 programme

- The programme creates a cycle of benefits through its target groups – individuals, organisations and communities.
- Organisations face challenges in working with volunteers with fewer opportunities, underscoring the need for continuous capacity building and programme support.

Efficiency

The programme has benefited from improved cost-effectiveness compared with the previous period. However, there are noticeable differences in cost-effectiveness across the programme's actions, suggesting that efficiency in some areas may benefit from targeted financial strategies.

Funding has proven very limited given the programme's ambitions and objectives. Despite a higher annual budget compared with 2018-2020 (22%), inflation has affected the programme's ability to achieve its goals. Therefore, budget allocations need to be aligned with the actual needs of young people and the ambition of promoting solidarity. The situation is compounded by the high demand for the programme. Compared with the 2018-2020 programme period, the current programme has managed to be roughly twice as cost-effective in terms of participant costs, with a cost of EUR 4 054 per participant when adjusting for inflation.

Moreover, some countries do not use all their planned budget, which affects the programme's overall performance. In contrast, countries facing higher demand cannot use more than 100% of their allocated budget.

Significant improvements have been made to measurement and monitoring. Nevertheless, challenges remain, particularly with the new IT tools that have not fully met users' needs. Moreover, the practical application of performance indicators needs refinement to fully capture the programme's impact. Monitoring the geographical balance of participation and the spread of benefits across participating countries is also essential.

Efficiency

Findings on the 2018-2020 programme

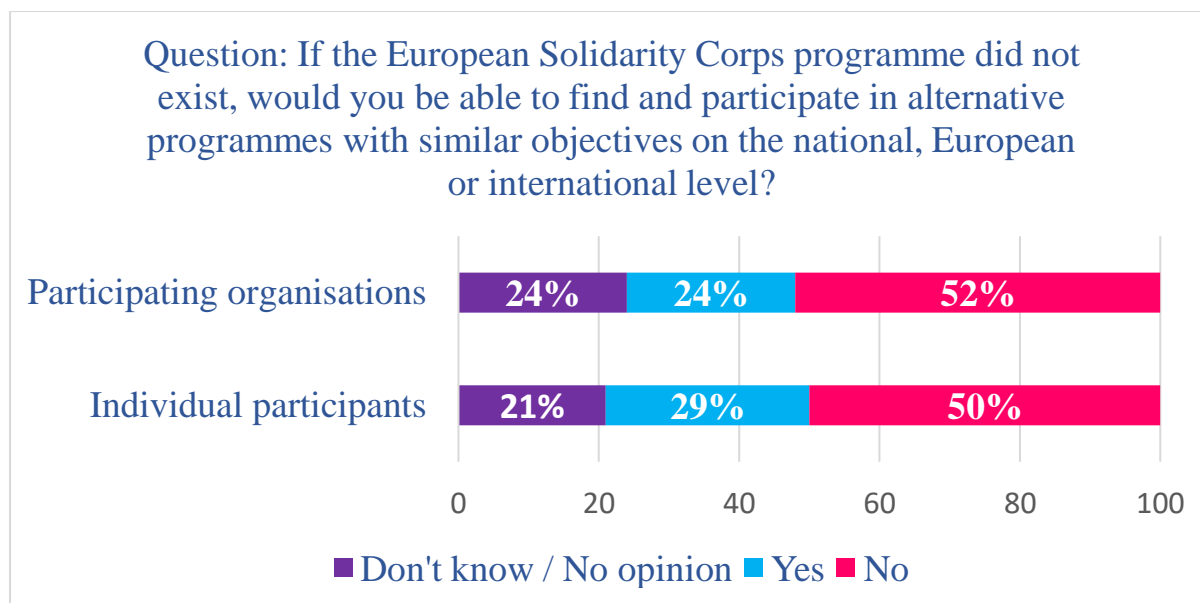
- Funding was deemed appropriate given the absorption rate of 79.4%. The low uptake in payments is not an indicator of excessive funding but of inflexible budget allocations and distortions due to the COVID-19 crisis.
- The administrative burden was reasonable according to most stakeholders.
- Programme management was seen as moderately efficient, with some criticism of the IT tools.

Findings on the 2021-2027 programme

- While many participants and organisations found the level of administrative burden manageable, processes can be further simplified.
- Programme management and implementation have been efficient overall. Flexible programme management mitigated the impact of external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- Programme funding was overall too low compared with the programme's needs and objectives, compounded by factors such as inflationary pressures.
- The IT tools' user-friendliness and functionalities require further attention despite their continuous improvement.

4.2 EU added value – how has the European Solidarity Corps made a difference so far and to whom?

For more than half of the organisations and participants, the European Solidarity Corps is the only available opportunity for volunteering and solidarity activities (see chart below).



Source: Public consultation

Participating organisations and individuals are expanding their focus beyond local issues and becoming aware of how their efforts contribute to the broader European landscape. Additionally, the positive attitude towards the EU clearly spills over to the communities and societal groups involved.

Strengthening democracy and active citizenship

The programme plays a key role in mitigating anti-EU and anti-democratic sentiments thanks to its strong international network that extends from national authorities to societal organisations, down to the community and individuals.

The link between volunteering activities and broader societal, political and citizenship engagement is very well-recognised. The programme drives broader societal participation as young people engaged in solidarity activities tend to develop a keen interest in society and politics.

Empowering youth

Resulting from the programme's contributions to objectives such as strengthening democracy, active citizenship, solidarity, and personal and professional development, the European Solidarity Corps contributes to youth empowerment by providing many benefits beyond national borders. The programme strengthens European identity and fosters support for European values, such as democracy and human rights.

The programme creates extensive pan-European networks, fostering long-term partnerships that facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaborative initiatives across Europe and beyond.

Facilitating the transition from education to employment

The European Solidarity Corps goes beyond its expected impact by helping young people facing obstacles to employment despite their educational achievements. The programme is appealing to those starting their careers who aim to bridge academic study and professional

practice, boosting their skills and gaining valuable experience. Although not a direct goal, the European Solidarity Corps tackles the disconnect between youth education and employment.

EU added value

General findings

- The European Solidarity Corps cultivates a sense of European identity and support for European values among its participants.

Findings on the 2018-2020 programme

- The programme promoted active citizenship and facilitated participants' personal development on a scale unlikely to be achieved through national efforts.
- The move from the European Voluntary Service to the European Solidarity Corps boosted EU added value by creating a single-entry point for solidarity activities.
- By broadening its scope, improving flexibility and strengthening objectives on inclusion, the European Solidarity Corps was better positioned than the European Voluntary Service to meet young people's needs.
- The programme provided better international networking and collaboration, which was difficult to achieve through national volunteering initiatives.

Findings on the 2021-2027 programme

- The European Solidarity Corps is a powerful initiative for youth empowerment with a unique blend of engagement opportunities.
- The programme includes young people facing a wide range of challenges.
- Participating organisations can enrich their professional skills and improve their organisational effectiveness.
- The programme's quality standards, including the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label, distinguish it from other schemes that may not offer the same level of consistency or scope in quality assurance.
- The programme is unique in creating pan-European networks, leading to long-term partnerships and relationships.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Including people with fewer opportunities

The current method of monitoring individuals with fewer opportunities relies on either reporting by organisations and National Agencies in the volunteering actions or self-reporting in the solidarity projects, which generates inconsistencies.

Recommendations:

- further clarify how the definition of young people with fewer opportunities should be interpreted;
- make the implementation guidelines – the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps inclusion and diversity strategy⁵ – more widely known;
- implement strategies to improve identifying people with fewer opportunities before they participate in projects;
- create more opportunities for capacity building in organisations, incorporating situational examples and exercises, to better identify and integrate participants with fewer opportunities;
- involve inclusion and diversity officers from the National Agencies in organising these exercises to ensure they align with the inclusion and diversity strategy's goals.

Addressing differences in the geographical distribution of results and impacts

Better monitoring the programme's geographical spread is needed to accurately assess how its benefits are spread and to implement the programme's solidarity objective.

Recommendations:

- continue to improve monitoring mechanisms to track where volunteer activities are taking place;
- if geographical imbalances are identified, encourage organisations from underrepresented regions to participate.

Improving visa arrangements for non-EU nationals

Volunteers and organisations have highlighted persisting issues with visa arrangements for non-EU nationals.

Recommendations:

- strengthen collaboration with the relevant national bodies to streamline the visa delivery process for non-EU participants;
- cooperate closely with the Member States in the implementation of Directive (EU) 2016/801⁶ on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purpose of research, studies training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing, in line with the Council's recommendation on young volunteer's mobility (2022/C157/01)⁷ on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union.

Aligning funding to the goals

⁵ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity-strategy>

⁶ OJ L 132, 2016/801, 21.5.2016, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOL_2016_132_R_0002.

⁷ OJ C, 2022/C157/01, 11.4.2022, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0411\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H0411(01)).

Funding for the European Solidarity Corps resembles that of a pilot programme and is too low to achieve what it sets out to do.

Recommendations:

- for the future, without prejudice to negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, consider better aligning the overall budget with the goals of the programme;
- consider planning for annual budget increases rather than a flat budget to make the programme more resilient to economic shocks;
- bring in an annual reassessment of the suitability of unit costs so that the programme can respond to organisations and participants' needs without compromising the quality of projects;
- in the definition of the future programme, explore with participating countries the possibility to recalibrate the criteria for funding allocation;
- better integrate the programme into other policy initiatives; for example, volunteers could benefit more from initiatives aiming to support occupational transitions and the needs of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and other vulnerable young people;
- maximise and further develop synergies with other programmes to make the most of existing funding and address common objectives.

Strengthening IT tools

IT tools that cannot be used easily by users or experience downtime pose challenges to efficiently implementing the programme and carry risks, such as data loss and delayed reporting.

Recommendations:

- conduct comprehensive user testing with a diverse group of end users to identify usability and accessibility issues, and ensure that IT tools meet all stakeholders' needs;
- further simplify the IT tools and forms used by organisations when applying for funding;
- ensure that contingency measures are in place to maintain data integrity and continuity when reporting tools are unavailable.

Aligning the humanitarian aid strand

There is room for further clarifying and communicating the purpose of the humanitarian aid strand to stakeholders to better manage their expectations. In addition, the strand's higher age limit of 35 years, against 30 years for the programme's other volunteering and solidarity activities, makes the programme less coherent and confuses stakeholders.

Recommendations:

- clearly communicate to participating organisations that the strand's purpose is to provide individual mobility and learning to volunteers who should not be expected to have professional skills and experience;

- consider aligning the humanitarian aid strand's age limit with the rest of the programme as the demand from people between 30 and 35 is not high (only 3% of the strand's total registrants).

6. WAY AHEAD

The evaluation's outcomes confirm that the European Solidarity Corps plays an essential role and, in some countries, is the only alternative for volunteering and solidarity. While a number of areas for improvement have been identified, the overall evaluation across the five criteria (relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, coherence, EU added value) is positive and forms the basis to further develop the programme's implementation under the 2021-2027 MFF and start reflections for the future programme under the 2028-2034 MFF.