



Guidelines to Connect and Develop Volunteering with NGOs

InterNational Network

VolunteerIN - Promoting volunteer and solidarity opportunities for
youth through International Network

Project n. 101227118



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1. Introduction
 - 1.1. Objectives
 - 1.2. Importance of effective volunteering partnership with local NGOs
 - 1.3. Benefits for NGOs
 - 1.4. Scope and applicability of the document
2. Basics of Volunteering partnership among NGOs
 - 2.1. Concept of volunteering partnership: definition and characteristic
 - 2.2. Types of volunteering and forms of collaborations with NGOs
 - 2.3. Key factors for a successful volunteering partnership
 - 2.4. Ethics, safeguarding and shared values in volunteering
3. Technical Legal Aspects for Partnership Development
 - 3.1. Legal considerations and data protection guidelines
 - 3.2. Adherence to Erasmus rules and regulations
4. Techniques for Establishing Mutual Trust, Clear Communication and Goal Alignment
 - 4.1. Techniques for fostering trust and mutual respect
 - 4.2. Alignment of volunteering activities development and NGOs objectives
 - 4.3. Managing expectations and long-term objectives
 - 4.4. Practical exercises to identify common interests
5. Resources and Tools for Essential Partnership Development
 - 5.1. Standardized documents and templates
 - Letter of intent (LOIs)
 - Learning Agreements
 - Data Protection Guidelines
 - 5.2. Feedback and evaluation forms for volunteer and NGOs staff

- 5.3. Examples of good practices and case studies in volunteering partnerships
- 6. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
 - 6.1. Common questions from partner organizations, youth organizations and NGOs
 - 6.2. Accurate and informed responses to foster confidence among stakeholders
- 7. Conclusions and Final recommendations
 - 7.1. Summary of key steps for building effective partnerships
 - 7.2. Recommendations for maximizing the impact of partnership
 - 7.3. Future opportunities for improvement and development
- 8. Annexes
 - 8.1. Glossary of key terms
 - 8.2. Additional resources and useful links
- 9. References and Bibliography
 - 9.1. Sources of information used in the preparation of the document

1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives

The main purpose of the document is to provide partners, youth organisations and NGOs practical and useful guidelines that allow them to establish robust relationships with local NGOs and develop meaningful volunteering activities, with a particular attention on the European context. It seeks to support organisations in designing, implementing, and reviewing volunteering partnerships that are both responsible and impactful.

More specifically, the document aims to equip organisations with tools to initiate and nurture partnerships that are rooted in local needs, clearly structured in terms of roles and responsibilities, and consistent with European policy frameworks on youth, solidarity and inclusion.

In addition, this document aims to provide detailed insights into various facets of partnership development and volunteer hosting, so that they can better understand the dynamics and characteristics of the volunteering system, so that they can better develop successful partnerships. Understanding the technical aspects and needs of NGOs facilitates the mutual.

Aside from these immediate goals, the text intends to inspire companies to take a more reflective and strategic approach to volunteering. Rather than considering volunteers as a distinct resource, it encourages NGOs to integrate volunteering into their larger goals, governance structures, and theories of change. By doing so, organisations are better positioned to critically examine why they engage volunteers, how this relates to their long-term priorities, and under what conditions volunteering genuinely adds value to communities, rather than becoming a sideline that consumes energy without reinforcing core work.

strengthens civil society's ability to defend rights and propose alternatives that are both realistic and grounded in community priorities.

1.3. Benefits for NGOs

Engaging in organized volunteering relationships, whether for individuals or non-governmental organizations, provides a set of outcomes that justify the time and resources necessary to establish and manage such collaborations properly. Volunteers can supplement staff capacity by bringing specialized skills (such as communication, digital technologies, non-formal education, research, or community outreach) when these responsibilities are explicitly defined and integrated into organizational goals. Studies on volunteer-involving organizations suggest that, when volunteer involvement is skillfully managed, it may boost organizational responsiveness, inventiveness, and the ability to execute more diversified activities, while maintaining the organization's relationship to its constituents and local stakeholders (Fernandes T, Matos MAD 2023).

Volunteering partnerships also reinforce organisational learning and internal quality. Evidence from European studies on impact measurement highlights that collecting feedback from volunteers, beneficiaries and partner organisations helps refine programmes and demonstrate added value to funders and communities (Volonteurope, 2018) underlining how structured reflection on volunteer involvement becomes a tool for continuous improvement.

Frameworks such as the European Solidarity Corps Quality Label and European cooperation initiatives on volunteering emphasise quality, safeguarding and capacity-building, which in turn enhance credibility, facilitate new partnerships and support more sustainable volunteer programmes.

Volunteer-based collaborations can help to strengthen ties within civil society. When better-resourced NGOs use volunteering initiatives to enhance the

institutional growth of local groups rather than simply increasing their own exposure or operational footprint, they help transfer skills, opportunities, and recognition. This might include combined training for staff and volunteers, collaborative contemplation spaces on ethics and safeguarding, or joint analysis and advocacy outcomes. In such circumstances, volunteering is more than just 'doing more activities', but also a tool for strengthening the leadership, ownership, and legitimacy of local NGOs in the eyes of their communities and institutional counterparts.

1.4. Scope and applicability of the document

These guidelines are primarily intended for groups that work within or closely related to European initiatives that promote volunteering and youth participation, particularly Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. They are relevant to a wide range of actors, including local NGOs that host volunteers, youth organizations and civil society organizations that send or host volunteers, umbrella networks and platforms that coordinate volunteering initiatives, and public institutions that work with NGOs to design and oversee volunteering schemes.

Geographically, the document focuses on partnerships involving European organisations and local NGOs in Europe and partner countries, nonetheless it could be applicable to other regions and specific contexts.

The content will focus on various facets of partnership development and volunteering hosting: from legal considerations, data protection guidelines, or adherence to Erasmus rules and regulations, as well as techniques for fostering mutual trust, clear communication and advice on how to set common goals. It does not replace legal or policy advice, but it translates them into operational guidance for organisations. They propose a set of core principles, standards and a reflective Frequently Asked Questions section (FQA) that can help organisations build partnerships that are locally grounded. In practice, this demands ongoing

communication among partners, openness to input from volunteers and communities, and a readiness to rebalance power and resources so that local NGOs may exercise actual leadership in identifying priorities and structuring volunteering activities.

The scope of the paper is to provide a conceptual and practical framework for organizations to adapt to their own realities, restrictions, and political settings. Users are advised to read the recommendations critically, compare them to the experiences of their partners and volunteers, and use them as a beginning point for collaborative reflection rather than as a checklist to be implemented in isolation from local dynamics. It does not substitute programme-specific regulations, national legislation, or expert legal advice.

2. Basics of Volunteering partnership among NGOs

Volunteering partnerships among NGOs are **grounded in collaborative practices** that aim to maximise social impact and strengthen organisational capacity. When strategically developed, these partnerships create opportunities for shared learning, expansion of community outreach, and more effective responses to social needs. They also allow organisations to pool complementary resources, such as specialised expertise, volunteer networks or logistical support, enhancing the sustainability and visibility of their initiatives. Establishing solid foundations for these collaborations is essential to ensure long-term effectiveness and to build trust-based relationships capable of adapting to evolving social challenges.

At the same time, volunteering partnerships among NGOs should be viewed as **part of a larger civil society and policy system**. They interact with state policies, financing systems, social movements, and informal community activities, and hence are influenced by larger power dynamics and institutional incentives. This means that a partnership is more than just a technical mechanism for recruiting volunteers, but also a political and social space in which organizations negotiate which

Reciprocity and interdependence also entails **deliberate negotiation of power**. Many volunteering partnerships have substantial differences in terms of size, finance, political capital, and technical skill. If these inequalities are not addressed clearly, one organization may become the 'lead' in all strategic concerns, while others are limited to implementation tasks. Therefore, it plays an important role to recognise these imbalances and seeks to address them through shared agenda-setting, transparent information flows, and equitable recognition of all contributions, including local knowledge, community trust, and the often unseen work of hosting and accompanying volunteers on a daily basis.

Flexibility also plays a central role, as participating organisations must be able to adapt their strategies and expectations as social priorities shift. This adaptability strengthens the partnership over time and ensures that volunteer efforts remain relevant, impactful and aligned with the evolving context in which NGOs operate.

The notion of a voluntary relationship between NGOs includes both **official and informal components**. Written agreements, established coordination structures, and collectively agreed processes are examples of formal aspects; informal elements stem from interpersonal trust, shared histories of collaboration, and the implicit conventions that govern how organizations operate in practice. Both levels are critical to the strength of the partnership: strong formal agreements without trust tend to remain on paper, but trust without a minimal framework can lead to overload, misunderstanding, and uneven obligations.

2.2. Types of volunteering and forms of collaborations with NGOs

Volunteering within NGOs can take multiple forms, each shaped by the needs of the community, the structure of the organisation and the nature of the activities carried out. NGOs often rely on a combination of volunteer roles, ranging from highly specialised contributions to short-term, community-based engagement, which enables them to respond to diverse social challenges with greater flexibility

and efficiency. The type of volunteering adopted also influences the form of partnership established, as NGOs must coordinate their strategies, resources and expectations with collaborating organisations or networks.

At the **local level**, collaborations often emerge between community-based NGOs and neighbourhood groups, focusing on immediate needs such as social inclusion activities, environmental clean-ups or support for vulnerable populations. These partnerships tend to be flexible, rooted in proximity and guided by intimate knowledge of local realities. National volunteering partnerships, on the other hand, involve NGOs operating across the country and larger institutions such as national youth councils, foundations or public agencies. These collaborations usually prioritise broader social challenges: youth participation, employability, climate action, and benefit from more formal structures, shared funding frameworks and coordinated volunteer training systems.

International volunteering partnerships add another layer of complexity and opportunity. These collaborations may involve local NGOs working with long-standing international organisations, creating hybrid models in which global expertise meets local experience. In other cases, networks are formed exclusively between long-established international organisations that coordinate cross-border volunteer exchanges, capacity-building programmes or joint advocacy campaigns. Whether local-to-local, local-to-international or international-to-international, each type of partnership brings different strengths: local actors offer contextual awareness and meaningful community relationships, while national and international organisations provide resources, visibility and structured methodologies. Together, these varied forms of collaboration allow volunteering initiatives to scale their impact while remaining grounded in the needs of the communities they serve.

A first category is **individual volunteering**, which includes regular, long-term participation in NGO activities, often linked to ongoing programmes such as educational support, mentoring or community development. This form of volunteering is particularly valuable for organisations that depend on consistent

engagement and relationship-building with beneficiaries. A second type is **collective or corporate volunteering**, where groups of volunteers, often from partner companies, collaborate with NGOs on specific initiatives. These collaborations can involve skill-based activities, such as strategic planning, digital training or legal advice, or more operational tasks, such as environmental clean-ups or event organisation. Corporate volunteering strengthens ties between NGOs and external partners, while offering companies an opportunity to promote social responsibility and employee engagement.

Another increasingly relevant model is **digital or remote volunteering**, which emerged strongly in recent years and allows volunteers to contribute regardless of geographical location. NGOs benefit from access to global expertise, while volunteers can support activities such as translation, content creation, administrative support or online mentoring. At a broader level, NGOs also engage in **network-based collaborations**, where multiple organisations coordinate volunteer programmes across regions or countries. These collaborative frameworks are particularly useful in international projects, as they facilitate the exchange of practices, harmonisation of methodologies and mobility opportunities for volunteers.

2.3. Key factors for a successful volunteering partnership

A successful volunteering partnership among NGOs relies on several core elements that ensure the collaboration is coherent, impactful and sustainable. One of the most important foundations is the **establishment of shared goals**. Before launching any joint initiative, organisations need to articulate what they aim to achieve, why the collaboration is necessary and how each party's contribution will support the overall purpose. Clear, mutually agreed objectives help align expectations, prevent misunderstandings and serve as a reference point for assessing the progress and outcomes of the partnership.

Equally essential is maintaining **strong and transparent communication**. NGOs must engage in continuous dialogue to ensure that both strategic decisions and day-to-day operations are coordinated effectively. Open communication channels allow partners to identify emerging needs, address potential obstacles early and adjust their approaches when circumstances change. This exchange should involve not only leadership but also the project teams and volunteers who execute activities on the ground, ensuring coherence between planning and implementation.

Another key factor is the **commitment of all parties to invest time, resources and expertise** throughout the duration of the collaboration. Volunteering partnerships often evolve over time, and the organisations involved must be prepared to adapt to new realities, refine their methods and remain engaged even when results are not immediate. Commitment is reflected in the willingness to share responsibilities, co-create solutions and support each other during challenges. Furthermore, successful partnerships benefit from a strong culture of accountability and continuous learning, where monitoring mechanisms, feedback processes and periodic evaluations help improve practices and reinforce trust.

Another fundamental component is the **clear awareness that partnership work needs specific institutions and resources of its own**. Coordination meetings, cooperative planning sessions, translation and interpretation, the development of shared tools, and the harmonization of monitoring systems all need time and, in many cases, financial resources. If these responsibilities are considered as invisible or secondary, they tend to fall disproportionately on local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or people whose contributions are not recognized or paid, undermining quality and equity. In contrast, when partners include partnership management in their planning and budgeting, they recognize that cooperation has both a cost and a benefit, and they create the circumstances for more balanced involvement and more stable, predictable partnerships.

The strength of a volunteering partnership depends on **building a relationship rooted in reliability, flexibility and shared purpose**. When these factors are

present, collaborations not only enhance the effectiveness of volunteer initiatives but also contribute to long-term organisational development and broader social impact.

2.4. Ethics, safeguarding and shared values in volunteering

Ethics and shared values form the backbone of any volunteering partnership, shaping not only the way NGOs collaborate but also the integrity and credibility of the initiatives they implement. A strong ethical foundation requires transparency in decision-making, honesty in communication and accountability for how resources, volunteers and beneficiaries are treated. When collaborating organisations share a common ethical stance, volunteer programmes are more likely to generate meaningful, sustainable outcomes and maintain the trust of the communities they aim to support.

Safeguarding is equally essential and must be embedded into all stages of volunteer coordination, from recruitment and training to project delivery. NGOs have a duty to ensure that volunteers, staff and beneficiaries, especially vulnerable groups, are protected from harm, exploitation and misconduct. This involves establishing clear codes of conduct, promoting safe working environments and implementing mechanisms for reporting concerns or inappropriate behaviour. Effective safeguarding practices strengthen the legitimacy of volunteer programmes and reinforce confidence among all stakeholders involved.

Shared values also play a central role in maintaining balanced and respectful relationships within partnerships. Organisations must ensure that collaboration does not compromise their mission, independence or core principles. At the same time, they should acknowledge and value the contributions, priorities and cultural perspectives of their partners. When mutual respect is present, partnerships can navigate challenges constructively and work toward a collective vision rooted in social responsibility.

Volunteering partnerships should be grounded in a **commitment to human rights, dignity and inclusivity**. Whether the focus is youth empowerment, community development or environmental sustainability, both volunteers and organisations should act in alignment with international standards and ethical norms. This commitment not only enhances the social impact of volunteer activities but also strengthens the reputational integrity of the organisations involved, promoting collaborations that are transparent, equitable and genuinely transformative.

Ethical reflection in volunteer relationships requires a clear difference between solidarity and substitution. When volunteers are utilized to fill structural gaps in public services or to take over tasks that should be filled by suitably compensated employees, the collaboration risks perpetuating rather than combating precariousness. NGOs should thus conduct a comprehensive examination of which duties are appropriate for volunteers, under what conditions and with what protections, and which functions must stay within the purview of employed personnel or governmental authorities. This approach is especially essential when local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are chronically underfunded and may feel obligated to recruit volunteers in order to maintain basic services. Treating this tension clearly, rather than normalizing it, is part of a genuine ethical approach to volunteering.

In this context, safeguarding is more than just a collection of formal procedures. It refers to the entire organisational environment in which volunteers, workers, and community members engage. This includes how boundaries are expressed and honored, how intimate or sensitive material is handled, and how complaints about misbehavior are received and resolved. Safeguarding measures must include interconnected vulnerabilities such as age, gender, disability, migrant status, socioeconomic situation, or exposure to violence, as well as the fact that volunteers may require safety while also serving in positions of trust.

Shared principles take on actual meaning only when they are translated into actions of accountability to the communities involved. This implies that individuals affected by volunteering activities have easy methods to voice their opinions, raise issues,

and influence choices, and that their input is treated seriously, even if it violates organizational preferences or donor expectations. Community gatherings, participatory evaluations, anonymous feedback systems, and collaborative reflection sessions with volunteers and community representatives can all assist to match the partnership's ethical principles with real-world experiences. In this view, ethics, safeguarding, and shared values are not static pronouncements made at the start of a project, but continuous commitments that must be evaluated, tested, and, if necessary, amended in light of how volunteering really plays out on the ground.

3. Technical Legal Aspects for Partnership Development

Those aspects are not an administrative add-on, they are a core component of partnership quality, by clarifying responsibilities, preventing misunderstandings, reducing power imbalances and supporting mutual accountability. For all organisations involved it demonstrates a commitment to ethical volunteering, respect for rights and long-term collaboration. Specifically local NGOs can serve as influence to improve internal governance and negotiate partnerships on more balanced terms.

3.1. Legal considerations and data protection guidelines

Partnerships between NGOs in the volunteering sector are based not only on common values and program objectives, but also on a defined legal and technical framework that protects volunteers, beneficiaries, and organizations.

From a legal perspective, the starting point is a set of written instruments. Cooperating NGOs should formalize their collaboration through **written partnership agreements and individual volunteer agreements**. The partnership agreement should clarify and identify roles, responsibilities, lines of authority, liability, and dispute-resolution mechanisms. In parallel, individual volunteers agreements should explicitly specify that volunteering does not replace paid work and must remain non-profit in nature, and assure compliance with national civil,

labor, and social security law (European Commission, 2024). For local NGOs, this framework offers legal protection and clearer negotiating power, especially when partnering with larger European organisations.

Moreover, Internal regulations should be consistent across partners. It is not enough for a coordinating organisation to have an advanced safeguarding policy if the on-the-ground local partner does not. The partnership should include, where needed, support for developing or updating local policies, recognising that legal and organisational capacity is itself uneven and that strengthening it is part of an equitable relationship.

In the European context, these arrangements interact with the broader framework on fundamental rights and non-discrimination, as well as specific safeguarding obligations when volunteers work with children or other vulnerable groups, necessitating the incorporation of child protection, leakage information, and complaints mechanisms into organisational policies and partnership tools (European Commission, 2023).

Data protection is a fundamental right in the EU, enshrined in Article 8 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, being a central dimension in any volunteering partnership. It comprises the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Law Enforcement Directive (LED), and the Data Protection Regulation for EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies (EUDPR). And this legislation has several monitoring instruments to avoid non-implementation, with fines if non-compliance.

Under this scheme, NGOs must treat personal data on volunteers, staff, and beneficiaries in accordance with the **EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**, which was put into effect in 2018, that regulates the management of personal data within the European Union, setting privacy and security standards that must be met to ensure privacy and information security. It clarifies who acts as data controller or processor, on what legal basis data are handled, and how data subject rights, security measures, and possible international transfers are managed

Documentation is also important in audit and litigation contexts: keeping systematic records of decisions, risk assessments, consent (when applicable), training activities, and data breaches demonstrates accountability and can protect both local and international partners in the event of disputes or supervisory authority investigations (European Commission, 2016, 2021).

3.2. Adherence to Erasmus rules and regulations

The Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes provide a comprehensive framework for volunteer activities, allowing NGOs to form partnerships focused on solidarity, social inclusion, and community development. For many groups, these initiatives represent the primary entry-point to formal European collaboration, allowing them to create and conduct cross-border volunteering projects. To properly take advantage of these opportunities, NGOs need a good grasp of the applicable norms and regulations, and how they translate into real requirements for partnership creation, execution, and accountability.

A first core element is the **eligibility of organisations, participants and activities**. When volunteering activities are financed by Erasmus+ or the European Solidarity Corps, relationship development is likewise governed by program-specific regulations and quality standards. Regulation (EU) 2021/888 and the European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide establish the legal framework, thus define which entities may participate (for example, NGOs, public bodies, social enterprises), which profiles of young people are eligible for volunteering (age, residence in participating countries) and which types of activities qualify as 'volunteering projects', including minimum and maximum duration and the nature of tasks (European Commission, 2021). NGOs that wish to cooperate in volunteering must check that both the sending and hosting organisations meet these criteria, and that the design of the activities respects key principles such as non-profit character, non-substitution of paid employment and clear benefit for communities.

Quality standards on inclusion, participation, safety, and safeguarding form a core part of Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps rules. Volunteering projects are expected to remove barriers, ensure non-discriminatory and supportive environments, and involve local NGOs in identifying exclusion, adapting methods to local realities, and designing support measures. At the same time, all partners must have clear safeguarding, complaints, and crisis procedures in place. Organisations engaging in EU volunteering initiatives must obtain a valid **Quality Label or comparable accreditation**, indicating that their internal systems and collaboration arrangements consistently satisfy the criteria of the European Solidarity Corps. This has practical impact for how duties are shared across sending, coordinating, and hosting organisations, how volunteer information is communicated, and how financial responsibilities and audit trails are managed within the consortium.

Erasmus guidelines regulate **paperwork and agreements**, requiring volunteer programs to specify the responsibilities of sending, hosting, and supporting organizations, as well as volunteer activities, learning goals, and support measures. These are often defined in activity agreements with volunteers and cooperation contracts with NGOs, which must be consistent with Program Guides and commitments made during Quality Label or certification applications (European Commission, 2024). Using standard templates from National Agencies or customized official guidelines helps to guarantee shared expectations and provides a clear reference for all partners, even smaller NGOs, on their duties.

Another important topic is the **administration of European funds**. Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps primarily use unit costs and lump amounts, which are supplemented in some circumstances with real-cost categories. Therefore, collaboration with many NGOs, especially local organizations, it is critical to agree on how the budget is divided, who is accountable for financial reporting, and how funds will be distributed and justified since if local NGOs are merely participating as informal implementers with no clear financial duties, they may be forced to cover actual expenditures without proper recompense, or face retrospective adjustments for spending they never had the opportunity to plan. The Programme Guides

gestures, is what transforms relationships from transactional to collaborative and builds confidence that risks and responsibilities will be shared fairly.

In addition, **active listening and structured space for dialogue** are essential to ensure an equal level of partnership. Regular talks about how volunteering impacts staff workloads, community relations, and power dynamics assist to keep local viewpoints in mind and allow for adjustments when initial plans become impractical or damaging. These spaces are particularly valuable when they include staff with different roles and levels of seniority, since those who work closest to volunteers and communities often detect tensions and opportunities that are not visible at coordination level. Mutual acknowledgment of various sorts of contributions such as financial resources, administrative effort, local expertise, and community trust, helps to maintain this balance and promotes more egalitarian decision-making. Making these different contributions visible in internal discussions, external communication and, where possible, in how budgets are structured, reinforces the message that respect within the partnership is based on the full range of work and responsibility assumed by each organisation, not only on financial weight or formal authority.

4.2. Alignment of volunteering activities development and NGOs objectives

Quality standards such as the Global Volunteering Standard emphasize the need of designing volunteer roles based on the organization's goal, strategic aims, and theory of change before translating them into actual tasks and placement plans (Forum, 2021). This approach helps prevent a 'volunteer-centred' logic in which activities are adapted primarily to volunteer availability or preferences, rather than to the organisation's mandate and the priorities of the communities concerned. In the European context, the European Solidarity Corps Programme Guide mandates that activities address identified community needs, fit into the organization's regular work, and contribute to broader program priorities such as inclusion, participation, and sustainability (European Commission, 2025). It also invites organisations to make explicit how individual volunteering placements contribute to wider strategies

and policy frameworks, so that micro-level tasks are clearly linked to broader change agendas rather than remaining isolated interventions. In this way, it supports current programs rather than creating new projects that waste staff time and split efforts.

Volunteering roles should be **designed on the basis of each NGO's mission, strategic priorities and identified community needs**, and only then translated into concrete tasks and placements so that volunteers reinforce existing work instead of creating parallel, disconnected activities. Periodic internal reviews of volunteer roles, involving both staff and volunteers, can then be used to check whether this alignment is still valid or whether roles need to be redesigned in light of organisational changes or new community needs.

Partners should each clarify what they want to change, for whom and over what timeframe, then identify the overlap: local NGOs define community-level priorities, while coordinating/sending NGOs can connect these to programme frameworks (for example, European Solidarity Corps priorities, SDGs) and volunteers' learning objectives. Making these different dimensions visible also helps partners to recognise potential tensions (i.e. between short-term visibility and long-term continuity) and to negotiate explicit trade-offs instead of allowing incompatible expectations to coexist unaddressed.

Co-create specific objectives for the volunteering component, rather than importing ready-made objectives from project templates, where NGOs jointly define what volunteering is expected to achieve for communities, for the organisations (capacity, methods, networks) and for volunteers' competence development, and ensure these objectives are written into partnership and volunteering agreements. These agreed objectives should then guide key processes such as the selection and preparation of volunteers, the design of support measures and the evaluation of activities, so that day-to-day decisions remain anchored in what the partnership has collectively committed to achieve.

Use a shared impact framework and simple indicators, where partners agree on a small set of indicators that link volunteer tasks to organisational and community goals (for example, changes in participation, continuity of services, new capacities in the NGO), and review them periodically so that activities can be adapted if they drift away from agreed objectives. Qualitative tools, such as reflection sessions, case studies or feedback from community members, can complement these indicators and capture changes that are difficult to quantify but crucial for understanding whether volunteering is genuinely reinforcing organisational and community goals.

Local NGOs should have real influence over whether volunteers are needed, which profiles are useful and when other forms of support (funding, training, advocacy) are more relevant, to avoid supply-driven or symbolic placements that do not serve community priorities. In practice, this means treating the decision to host or not to host volunteers as an outcome of joint analysis, not as a fixed condition attached to funding, so that volunteering remains a flexible instrument at the service of local strategies rather than a constraint that partners are obliged to accommodate.

4.3. Managing expectations and long-term objectives

Expectations in volunteering partnership are not only related to resources and outputs, but also on the role of volunteers, the intensity of support that local organisations can realistically provide and the feasible change that partners want to achieve in the partnership. The European Solidarity Corps guidelines note that young volunteers have their own ideas and goals, and that organizations must be aware of their expectations while offering a respectful and trustworthy atmosphere. This requires a clear understanding of not just what volunteers are expected to accomplish, but also what they are not expected to do, as well as how their presence will impact staff workloads, decision-making, and community relations. Clarifying these elements early helps to prevent implicit assumptions from turning into frustration, and allows organisations to be honest with volunteers about what the partnership can and cannot offer in terms of support, influence and impact.

might otherwise remain in blind spots, such as how power is perceived, how inclusive decision-making really is or how burdens and benefits are distributed in practice. When these perspectives are fed back into joint planning and are seen to influence concrete decisions, they reinforce the sense that the partnership is not only a negotiation between NGOs, but a broader collaborative field in which those most directly affected by volunteering have a recognised voice.

5. Resources and Tools for Essential Partnership Development

Effective partnership development relies not only on strategic alignment and mutual commitment but also on the practical tools that structure, formalise and support collaboration. Standardised resources play a crucial role in ensuring that expectations are clear from the outset, that responsibilities are properly defined and that communication remains consistent throughout the partnership lifecycle. By using common templates and formal documents, organisations reduce the risk of misunderstandings, streamline administrative procedures and create a professional framework that enhances trust between partners. These tools also help establish transparency and accountability, making it easier to monitor progress, evaluate outcomes and ensure compliance with ethical, legal and operational standards.

Standardised documentation is particularly valuable in settings where multiple stakeholders interact, including NGOs, companies, volunteers, trainees and international partners, because it offers a shared reference point that guides all parties. Such documents strengthen the internal organisation of NGOs, facilitate smoother coordination with external partners and contribute to more predictable and efficient project implementation. For international volunteering or mobility programmes, in particular, these templates become essential instruments that safeguard participants, define learning structures and ensure alignment with regulatory frameworks such as GDPR or Erasmus+ requirements.

5.1 Standardized documents and templates

Example of Letter of Intent

[City], [Date]

Between:

Inspire Youth NGO

Address: Rua das Flores 28, 1100-122 Lisboa

Represented by: *Ana Martins, Programme Director*

And:

BrightTech Innovations, S.A.

Address: Avenida Europa 145, 1050-001 Lisboa

Represented by: *Miguel Andrade, Head of Corporate Development*

Whereas:

1. InspireYouth is a non-profit organisation working to promote youth employability and inclusion through international volunteering, vocational training and mobility programmes supported by Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.
2. BrightTech Innovations is committed to expanding its corporate social responsibility initiatives and wishes to collaborate with InspireYouth to host international trainees and support their professional development.

Purpose of the Collaboration:

The purpose of this Letter of Intent is to establish the preliminary framework for a future partnership in which BrightTech will host young European volunteers for short-term and long-term placements, allowing them to gain work experience while contributing to socially oriented technological projects.

Objectives of the Collaboration:

1. To offer international trainees meaningful work-based learning experiences in technology-related fields.
2. To promote the exchange of skills and ideas between young Europeans and BrightTech's innovation teams.
3. To reinforce BrightTech's corporate responsibility strategy through talent development and community engagement.
4. To strengthen InspireYouth's capacity to provide high-quality mobility opportunities.

Preliminary Commitments:

InspireYouth agrees to:

- select suitable candidates according to BrightTech's role profiles;
- provide pre-departure training and cultural orientation;
- coordinate logistics such as travel, insurance and accommodation;
- maintain communication during the traineeship and support performance monitoring.

BrightTech agrees to:

- provide a safe, inclusive and structured learning environment;
- assign interns to meaningful tasks under the supervision of a qualified mentor;
- integrate participants into team activities and internal training sessions;
- provide a final performance evaluation and professional feedback.

Deadline for the Formalisation of the Final Agreement:

Both parties agree to meet within 60 days from the signing of this LOI to finalise a comprehensive Partnership Agreement defining the operational, financial and legal details of the collaboration.

Signatures

For InspireYouth NGO:

Ana Martins

Programme Director

Date: _____

For BrightTech Innovations, S.A.:

Miguel Andrade

Head of Corporate Development

Date: _____

Learning Agreements

Learning agreements are central in contexts involving internships, traineeships or structured volunteer placements because they define exactly what participants will learn, how they will work and how their progress will be evaluated. They ensure that expectations between the NGO, the host company and the participant are aligned from the start. The presence of clearly defined objectives, supervision arrangements and evaluation methods ensures coherence between what the NGO, the host organisation and the participant expect from the learning experience. These agreements also enhance the quality of mobility programmes by promoting consistency, transparency and fairness across different placements.

A good learning agreement typically includes:

- participant identification;
- assigned mentor/supervisor;
- learning objectives and expected competences;
- daily tasks and responsibilities;
- working hours and duration;

- evaluation mechanisms (mid-term and final review);
- rights and obligations of the participant;
- signatures of all three parties.

Example of Learning Agreement

Learning Agreement for International Traineeship

Programme: Erasmus+ / ESC Mobility Placement

Host Company: BrightTech Innovations, S.A.

NGO: InspireYouth

Participant: Sofia Ribeiro

1. Learning Objectives

The participant will:

- develop practical skills in digital communications and project support;
 - acquire competences in teamwork, intercultural collaboration and problem-solving;
- gain experience in managing online platforms and digital content tools;
- contribute to community-oriented technology initiatives.

2. Assigned Tasks

During the placement, the participant will be responsible for:

- supporting the communications team in preparing digital materials;
- attending weekly project meetings and preparing brief reports;
- assisting in planning awareness campaigns on youth digital literacy;
- participating in internal training sessions relevant to their role.

3. Duration and Working Hours

- Duration: 3 months (March-June 2025)
- Schedule: Monday-Friday, 09:00-17:00
- Lunch break: 1 hour

4. Mentorship and Evaluation

- Mentor: João Carvalho, Digital Projects Coordinator
- Mid-term evaluation: Week 6
- Final evaluation: Final week of placement
- Tools used: feedback forms, reflective journal, performance rubric

5. Rights and Obligations

The participant agrees to:

- respect workplace policies and confidentiality rules;
- complete assigned tasks responsibly;
- communicate challenges to their supervisor or NGO coordinator.

The host company agrees to:

- provide safe working conditions, training and supervision;
- support the participant's learning objectives;
- issue a final evaluation and certificate.

The NGO agrees to:

- provide ongoing support;
- mediate in case of difficulties;
- ensure compliance with programme standards.

Signatures

Participant: _____

NGO: _____

Company supervisor: _____

Data Protection Guidelines

Data protection guidelines are another critical component of partnership documentation, especially when working with young people or vulnerable groups, whose personal data must be handled with particular care. These guidelines outline

how personal data will be collected, managed and stored, ensuring compliance with GDPR and other relevant regulations. They define the roles and responsibilities of each organisation in handling sensitive information and provide clear procedures for managing consent, responding to data access requests or addressing potential security breaches. By establishing robust data protection practices, organisations not only fulfil their legal obligations but also reinforce the trust of participants and demonstrate a commitment to ethical and responsible management.

Standard data protection guidelines should:

- define which data is collected (e.g., contact details, CVs, emergency info);
- explain why the data is needed and how long it will be stored;
- describe security measures for storing and transferring data;
- clarify who has access to data and under what conditions;
- outline procedures for consent, withdrawal, and breach notification.

Example of Data Protection Guidelines

Data Protection Guidelines for NGO–Company Volunteering Partnerships

1. Data Collected:

Personal identification, contact details, CV, emergency contacts, learning agreement, evaluation forms.

2. Purpose:

To administer the mobility programme, ensure learning quality, maintain communication and guarantee participant safety.

3. Data Storage:

All documents stored on encrypted servers with restricted access. Paper records kept in locked archives.

4. Data Sharing:

Only the NGO and the host company have access. No data shared with third parties without explicit written consent.

5. Retention Period:

Data stored for a maximum of five years, unless legally required otherwise.

6. Participant Rights:

Participants may request access, correction or deletion of their data at any time by contacting the Data Protection Officer.

7. Breach Protocol:

Both organisations must inform the participant and relevant authorities within 72 hours in case of a suspected breach.

8. Responsibility:

Both parties commit to adhering to GDPR standards and to implementing preventive measures against misuse of information.

The use of standardised documents and templates significantly strengthens partnership development by offering structure, legitimacy and clarity to collaborative work. They ensure that both NGOs and partner organisations operate within a shared framework of expectations and responsibilities, reducing ambiguity and enabling more efficient coordination. With these documents in place, partnerships can focus more effectively on delivering meaningful impact, confident that administrative, procedural and legal aspects are well managed and aligned with best practices.

5.2 Feedback and evaluation forms for volunteer and NGOs staff

A well-structured feedback and evaluation system is essential for ensuring that volunteering programmes remain effective, transparent and responsive to the needs of both participants and communities. Rather than being viewed as a procedural formality, evaluation forms should function as meaningful tools that capture experiences, measure outcomes and support continuous learning. When thoughtfully designed, they create a space in which volunteers, NGO staff and partner organisations can reflect openly on what works well, what requires improvement and how future initiatives can be strengthened.

Effective volunteer feedback forms typically combine quantitative indicators, such as clarity of instructions, adequacy of training or satisfaction with supervision, with open-ended questions that encourage deeper reflection. Instead of relying solely on numerical ratings, forms should offer opportunities for volunteers to describe moments that stood out, challenges they encountered or skills they believe they developed. This not only provides NGOs with insights into programme quality but also helps volunteers articulate their own learning journey. For example, a volunteer might note that ‘participating in the youth entrepreneurship workshops helped me improve my facilitation skills and gain confidence when working with diverse groups’, offering a nuanced perspective that metrics alone cannot capture.

Evaluation forms for NGO staff follow a similar logic but tend to focus more on operational efficiency, coordination practices and the support provided to volunteers. Staff might be asked to comment on how well the partnership functioned, whether communication channels were effective or how prepared they felt to address safeguarding issues. These forms also help identify structural barriers, such as limited resources, training needs or organisational constraints, that may affect programme quality. When staff voices are valued in this process, NGOs can better align internal procedures with the realities of fieldwork.

Creative approaches can make the evaluation process more engaging and authentic. For instance, organisations may encourage volunteers to write short reflective letters addressed to future volunteers, sharing what they wish they had known before starting. NGO staff could be invited to compose brief internal memos describing programme highlights or concerns observed during implementation. These narrative formats allow participants to express themselves more freely, offering richer and more vivid insights than traditional templates.

To maximise impact, feedback should never remain static on a page. NGOs must develop clear mechanisms for analysing responses, integrating findings into programme planning and communicating improvements back to participants. This transparent cycle: collect, analyse, act and report, demonstrates respect for contributors and reinforces the idea that evaluation is a collaborative process, not a bureaucratic obligation.

Ultimately, when evaluation forms are thoughtfully crafted and genuinely valued, they become a cornerstone of quality assurance. They help organisations deepen their understanding of volunteer engagement, enhance staff performance and cultivate a culture of reflection that strengthens the long-term effectiveness of volunteering initiatives.

5.3 Examples of good practices and case studies in volunteering partnerships

Real-world examples of successful volunteering partnerships offer powerful evidence of how collaboration between NGOs, businesses, public institutions and community actors can generate meaningful and long-lasting impact. The values and strategies that help partnerships thrive, that require adaptability, mutual commitment and a willingness to learn from experience. By examining such examples across different countries, sectors and contexts, organisations gain practical insights that can inform future initiatives and inspire innovation by supporting others designing more equitable, innovative and impactful collaborations. Through continuous reflection and exchange, volunteering

partnerships can evolve into powerful engines of social transformation across Europe and beyond.

One strong example of effective collaboration is the creation of inclusive volunteering and internship pathways aimed at supporting young people who face barriers to entering the labour market. Countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have developed structured programmes in which NGOs work closely with companies to offer on-the-job learning opportunities to refugees, young migrants, individuals with disabilities and young people with low formal qualifications. These initiatives demonstrate that, when companies embrace diversity and receive adequate support from NGOs, the workplace becomes a space for empowerment rather than exclusion. Young participants gain confidence, develop practical skills and build networks, while companies benefit from fresh perspectives and a more socially responsible workforce culture.

Within the European civil society network, a notable example is Somos Europa, which has hosted more than ten international students through Erasmus+ traineeships. The organisation created a dynamic environment where participants could contribute to communication, project management and community engagement tasks, while receiving mentorship and gaining exposure to European opportunities. Many of these young people discovered the programme through partner organisations abroad, illustrating the ripple effect of strong networks. By offering structured guidance, clear responsibilities and an inclusive atmosphere, Somos Europa demonstrates how hosting organisations can turn short-term internships into deeply formative experiences.

Another promising area is the development of technical training programmes shaped through public-private partnerships. In countries such as Ireland and France, NGOs, technology companies and government agencies co-design training curricula aligned with labour market needs, especially in sectors such as cybersecurity, green technologies and digital innovation. These programmes combine classroom learning with immersive placements in companies, ensuring that young people graduate

with both theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience. Companies, in turn, gain access to motivated young talent equipped with up-to-date competencies. The success of these initiatives highlights how strategic cooperation can reduce skill shortages and accelerate youth employability.

Transnational mentoring initiatives also stand out as a best practice, particularly in mobility programmes involving young people moving across borders for training or work experience. Experiences from Italy and Spain show that pairing young participants with local mentors helps ease the transition into a new cultural and professional environment. Mentors guide them through job-seeking strategies, language improvement and workplace expectations, while also helping build local networks that are often essential for finding employment. These mentoring relationships frequently continue beyond the programme, creating long-term support systems rooted in trust and solidarity.

Innovative collaborations between NGOs, companies and universities further demonstrate the potential of volunteering partnerships. In Denmark and Poland, joint 'social innovation labs' bring together students, researchers, businesses and civil society organisations to co-create solutions addressing issues such as waste reduction, digital inclusion or community welfare. These labs encourage creative thinking, interdisciplinary cooperation and entrepreneurial mindsets, while giving young people a structured space to experiment with ideas that have real societal relevance. For companies, these settings provide opportunities to explore sustainable practices and test new approaches in a low-risk environment.

Regional collaborative networks have proven particularly effective in countries like Greece and Portugal, where NGOs, businesses, municipalities and community organisations join forces to address local development challenges. These networks allow stakeholders to pool resources, access specialised knowledge and design collective strategies tailored to rural or economically disadvantaged areas. In many cases, they have supported vocational training programmes, youth employment initiatives and community-based volunteering projects that would have been

impossible for a single organisation to implement alone. The collaborative nature of these networks strengthens resilience and builds a culture of shared responsibility within the community.

6. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

The Frequently Asked Questions section is a key instrument for improving understanding and ensuring accessible, relevant information within partnerships between organisations engaged in volunteer-based work. This resource provides early clarification of issues that commonly emerge during the formation and development of inter-organisational collaborations, thereby enhancing the efficiency of communication and supporting a more coherent and coordinated relationship among the parties involved.

Partnerships among organisations dedicated to volunteer-based initiatives depend on coherent governance, equitable distribution of responsibilities and methodological consistency across programmes. The following questions integrate additional dimensions related to youth volunteering, an area that often requires heightened attention to safeguarding, pedagogical coherence and inter-institutional coordination.

6.1. Common questions from partner organizations, youth organizations and NGOs

Do organisations need to meet specific formal requirements before entering a partnership with another NGO?

Organisations should be legally constituted and compliant with national regulations governing non-profit activity. They must demonstrate administrative consistency, transparent financial management and an operational structure compatible with the responsibilities of the partnership. These conditions are especially relevant when

programmes involve minors or young adults, as oversight obligations are more stringent.

Is an initial financial investment required to join a volunteer-oriented partnership?

Direct financial contributions are usually unnecessary. The essential commitment lies in dedicating staff time, infrastructure and organisational capacity to sustain planning, communication, training and evaluation activities. Youth volunteering programmes may require additional investment in safeguarding systems and supervision protocols.

How can a partnership between NGOs be formalised?

A formal agreement or memorandum of understanding should articulate objectives, governance mechanisms, duration, monitoring procedures, responsibilities toward volunteers and protocols for safeguarding young participants. Explicit reference to ethical standards and risk-management practices strengthens the reliability of the partnership.

What legal considerations must be addressed when collaborating with other NGOs?

Compliance is required in areas such as personal data protection, insurance coverage, safeguarding policies, risk assessments and liability frameworks. When programmes include youth mobility, organisations must verify adherence to national and international regulations governing travel, supervision, emergency procedures and parental consent.

What benefits can an organisation gain from collaborating with another NGO?

Cooperation expands access to technical expertise, community networks, volunteer pools and complementary methodologies. Programmes involving young volunteers gain additional value through shared pedagogical resources, stronger mentoring structures and more diverse learning environments.

How can the long-term sustainability of a partnership be ensured?

Sustainability relies on consistent communication, equitable distribution of

responsibilities, joint planning and regular evaluation. In youth volunteering, sustainability also depends on maintaining robust educational frameworks and adapting programme design to evolving youth needs and social challenges.

What resources can one organisation provide to another within a partnership?

Resources may include training materials, safeguarding protocols, volunteer management systems, pedagogical tools, communication platforms, community access and logistical support. When working with young volunteers, sharing expertise in youth development, supervision and mentoring practices becomes particularly valuable.

Can organisations with different operational models or thematic priorities collaborate effectively?

Effective collaboration requires explicit identification of complementary capacities and a shared operational agenda. Differences in scale, methodology or thematic focus can strengthen the partnership when acknowledged early and translated into clearly defined roles that avoid duplication and power imbalances.

What considerations arise when a local NGO collaborates with a large-scale or internationally operating organisation?

Asymmetries in resources, institutional visibility and procedural structures require negotiated agreements that protect the decision-making capacity of local organisations. Local partners contribute contextual knowledge, community legitimacy and long-term presence, while larger organisations often provide technical guidance, monitoring frameworks and broader outreach.

How should organisations manage potential conflicts within the partnership?

Conflict management should rely on predefined communication protocols, documentation systems, mediation mechanisms and structured review procedures. These mechanisms prevent disruptions, protect volunteers and ensure that programme delivery remains coherent.

What mechanisms ensure accountability within an NGO partnership?

Accountability is strengthened through shared monitoring tools, transparent

financial reporting, public documentation of activities and consistent evaluation procedures. Programmes involving young volunteers require specific accountability for safeguarding, educational outcomes and the quality of mentoring processes.

How can organisations measure the impact of joint volunteer programmes?

Impact measurement requires shared indicators, standardised data collection, ethical research procedures and analytical frameworks adapted to youth participation. Evaluation should capture both community outcomes and the developmental benefits experienced by young volunteers.

What additional safeguards are required when the partnership involves young volunteers?

Safeguards include rigorous background checks for staff and mentors, comprehensive risk assessments, clear supervision ratios, age-appropriate training, emergency response protocols and secure data handling. These measures must be reviewed regularly and aligned with national child and youth protection regulations.

How can organisations ensure that young volunteers receive adequate training before participating in activities?

Training should cover ethical guidelines, safety procedures, cultural awareness, community engagement principles and task-specific competencies. A shared training curriculum ensures consistency across organisations and enhances the quality and safety of volunteer engagement.

What strategies can organisations use to maintain the motivation and well-being of young volunteers?

Strategies include structured mentoring, opportunities for reflection, recognition systems based on learning rather than performance, and accessible channels for reporting concerns. Programmes should integrate psychosocial support and practices that foster a sense of agency and belonging.

How can organisations ensure meaningful participation of young volunteers rather than tokenistic involvement?

Meaningful participation requires involving young people in decision-making

processes, co-designing activities with them, providing space for critical reflection and recognising their contributions as substantive. Joint governance structures can incorporate youth advisory roles to strengthen legitimacy and responsiveness.

6.2 Accurate and informed responses to foster confidence among stakeholders

The capacity to provide prompt and clearly articulated responses is essential for maintaining effective collaboration among organisations engaged in volunteer-based work. Responsiveness demonstrates institutional commitment, facilitates coordinated action and reinforces the trust required to manage programmes that depend on shared responsibilities, community interaction and volunteer participation. Clear communication reduces the risk of interpretive gaps and helps ensure that all organisations operate with aligned expectations, objectives and procedural standards.

Developing a document that compiles common questions and their corresponding responses is a practice that supports coherence and accessibility. This resource should be updated periodically to reflect new operational scenarios, emerging risks, procedural changes or lessons learned during joint programme implementation. Making such information available through accessible channels, including a dedicated FAQ section on the partners' websites or shared digital platforms, allows organisations to access essential information without generating additional administrative demand.

The use of precise, direct language is a central element in fostering mutual understanding. Technical jargon, ambiguous terminology and context-dependent expressions should be avoided unless they are accompanied by clear explanations. Employing concrete examples drawn from volunteer management, safeguarding practice or coordination processes strengthens comprehension, particularly in partnerships that involve organisations with different levels of professionalisation or operate in multilingual contexts.

hybrid framework that reconciles these approaches without undermining either party's integrity.

Creating consistent feedback channels enhances the ability to address doubts before they become obstacles. Periodic review meetings, structured feedback sessions and confidential communication spaces allow representatives to discuss emerging issues without fear of punitive consequences. Transparent and psychologically safe environments encourage honest reflection and foster a sense of shared responsibility for the health of the partnership.

Using open-ended questions further deepens the quality of dialogue: questions that invite reflection rather than confirmation help identify concerns that might otherwise remain unspoken. Asking how collaboration processes could be strengthened, what forms of support volunteers may require or which operational practices feel misaligned can reveal insights that closed questions fail to capture.

Training in communication and conflict-resolution skills is essential for representatives of all partnering organisations. Competencies such as active listening, empathy, facilitation techniques and constructive negotiation contribute to clearer understanding and more equitable problem-solving. Scenario-based exercises, simulations of complex volunteer-management situations and reflective supervision practices equip teams to handle objections with professionalism and technical consistency.

Developing a structured plan for addressing concerns provides an additional layer of stability. Such a plan should outline escalation procedures, designate responsibilities for follow-up, specify timeframes for responding to persistent issues and integrate mechanisms for documenting and reviewing recurring patterns. This structure helps ensure that concerns are addressed systematically rather than episodically.

Proactive management of doubts and objections reinforces the credibility of the partnership and supports the sustainability of volunteer programmes. By institutionalising openness, reflective dialogue and procedural consistency,

On that basis, the **internal architecture of the partnership** has to be clarified. Many difficulties arise not from bad intentions, but from unspoken assumptions about who leads, who decides and who implements. It is therefore important to spell out which organisation will coordinate, which will host volunteers on a daily basis, which will provide training or specialised support, and who is responsible for relations with communities and institutions. Governance also needs attention: decisions that affect all partners should not be taken informally by one or two people and communicated afterwards. Agreeing in advance which matters require joint discussion, how disagreements will be handled and how information will be circulated helps to avoid frustration later. These points can be captured in a partnership agreement or similar document, but the key element is that the content is genuinely negotiated and understood, not simply accepted as a condition of funding.

At the same time, a **minimum legal and technical framework** is needed from the beginning. Partnerships must have a shared understanding of what 'volunteering' means in the legal systems they operate in, where the boundary with employment lies, and which tasks volunteers can and cannot carry out. They should also agree on basic conditions related to health, safety, insurance and data protection. Leaving these questions vague creates risks both for volunteers and for those they work with. When they are addressed early, in simple language, they give organisations and communities confidence that the partnership takes its duty of care seriously and that volunteers will not be used to fill structural gaps in ways that undermine local labour standards or public responsibilities.

Once these foundations are in place, attention can turn to the **design of volunteer roles and profiles**. A frequent weakness in partnerships is to start with volunteers and then look for tasks, instead of the other way round. A more coherent approach begins with the programmes and activities that already exist in each organisation and asks where volunteers can strengthen them without creating parallel projects or placing extra burdens on staff. Roles should be limited in scope, clearly described and connected to concrete learning and support arrangements. Local NGOs should be directly involved in defining these roles, since they know best what will be useful

and acceptable in their context. It is also important to revisit role descriptions after a period of implementation, incorporating feedback from volunteers, staff and community members to adjust objectives, tasks and support if necessary.

None of this functions without a **conscious effort to build trust and manage expectations**. From the outset, partners need to talk openly about what they hope to gain and what they are willing and able to invest. For some organisations, the main interest may be additional human resources; for others, access to new networks, increased visibility, or learning on specific topics. If these expectations are not shared and examined together, they easily turn into **sources of disappointment or suspicion**. **Regular conversations that go beyond operational coordination** and allow space to discuss concerns, limits and changes in context are therefore essential. In these discussions, it is important that **local NGOs feel able to say when demands are unrealistic or when proposed activities are not appropriate locally, without fearing that this will put the partnership at risk**.

Resources and time dedicated specifically to the partnership are another key element. Coordination, joint planning, translation, reporting, supervision of volunteers and reflection do not happen automatically, they **require staff, skills and protected time**. If these functions are treated as invisible or 'extra work', they tend to **fall disproportionately on those with fewer resources**, often the local NGOs who are already stretched. **Including partnership management and volunteer coordination explicitly in budgets and internal planning** sends a different message: that this work is recognised as necessary and that its costs are not expected to be absorbed silently. Over time, this recognition supports **more balanced and stable cooperation**.

Monitoring, evaluation and joint learning link these different steps together. Rather than a separate technical exercise at the end of a project, they should be **integrated into the regular rhythm of the partnership**. Simple tools and questions are often enough: how many volunteers stayed for the full period, how staff and volunteers assess the quality of support, how community members describe their experience of the activities, whether planned changes in participation or access to

services are visible. What matters is that this information is **shared among partners and discussed honestly**, not that it satisfies an external template. When partners treat each cycle of volunteering as an **opportunity to look critically at their own practice**, they are more likely to identify structural issues such as **overloading local staff, reproducing power imbalances or responding weakly to safeguarding concerns**, and to correct them over time.

Finally, effective partnerships pay attention from the beginning to **continuity and possible endings**. No collaboration is indefinite, and **planning for change is part of responsible practice**. Partners should ask what elements they want to remain once a particular project or funding source ends: strengthened local organisations, more robust volunteer management systems, lasting links between NGOs and institutions, or new forms of community participation. They should also consider **how they will communicate with volunteers and communities about transitions**, so that people are not left with abrupt interruptions or unfulfilled promises. When **sustainability and exit are treated as normal topics of conversation**, rather than as signs of failure, partnerships are better able to **protect the trust they have built** and to ensure that volunteering leaves a **constructive legacy instead of a sense of loss**.

7.2 Recommendations for maximizing the impact of partnership

Maximising the added value of a volunteering partnership among NGOs means treating it as more than a coordination mechanism. A partnership is most effective when it is understood as a **shared strategic space**, not just as a container for individual projects. From time to time, organisations need to step back from daily implementation and look together at the whole picture: who is being reached, which themes concentrate most effort, where there is duplication, and where important needs remain unattended. When partners regularly create this wider view, they can see more clearly **where to concentrate energy and where to stop doing things**, instead of allowing activities to accumulate without a clear sense of priority.

Another key element is a common understanding of **different time horizons**. Volunteering usually moves in short cycles, while changes in organisations and communities require years. If all goals are framed in the short term, cooperation risks becoming a sequence of intense but disconnected episodes. Partners can work differently by agreeing what is realistic within a single volunteering period, what should be consolidated over several cycles, and what belongs to a longer trajectory. On this basis, it becomes possible to organise handovers between generations of volunteers, to keep certain lines of work open beyond a single project, and to ensure that **knowledge and relationships are not 'reset' every year**.

The way the partnership uses information also matters. Most organisations collect data and impressions about their activities, but this material often remains under-used. A more purposeful approach starts with a small set of shared questions, such as: what changes are we seeing in community participation, how are staff and volunteers experiencing the collaboration, which initiatives continue once volunteers leave, and where tensions are appearing. Partners then agree on simple ways to gather and discuss this information. The central point is that **evidence must lead to decisions**: if some actions show little effect or create unwanted consequences, they are adapted or discontinued, even if they look good on paper.

Volunteering takes place close to everyday life, but NGOs are also present in institutional arenas. A partnership becomes stronger when it acts as a **bridge between local practice and wider policy discussions**. Observations from volunteers and local NGOs can feed into municipal plans, regional strategies or European debates, rather than staying confined to final reports. This may involve coordinated participation in consultations, regular contact with public authorities, or joint positioning on issues that directly affect the communities involved. In the opposite direction, decisions and agreements made at policy level can be translated back into concrete protections, resources and opportunities for those participating in volunteering.

The internal culture of the partnership is another decisive factor. The way partners relate to each other every day shapes what they are capable of achieving together. A culture that values **openness, curiosity and the ability to question routines** creates space for staff and volunteers to bring forward uncomfortable observations and new ideas. This can be seen in small practices: inviting comments from quieter partners, taking serious feedback that points to power imbalances, or being ready to adjust long-established methods when they exclude certain groups. Over time, such habits determine which realities are taken into account and which are ignored, and therefore also influence the quality of the results achieved.

Each activity carried out under the partnership has a potential that goes beyond its immediate purpose. A training course, a local event or a specific volunteer initiative can produce tools, contacts or insights that are useful elsewhere. Partners can ask systematically what can be **made reusable or transferable** from each experience: a method that can be documented, a relationship that can be nurtured, a local idea that can be tested in another place. Thinking in this way means that the partnership is not constantly starting from zero, but slowly builds a shared reservoir of practices, materials and relationships that can be mobilised in future work.

The composition of the partnership itself should not be assumed as fixed. Contexts change, new organisations emerge, some actors lose capacity, others gain relevance. Periodically, it is healthy to review whether the current configuration still reflects the objectives pursued, or whether it would be useful to involve other types of actors, such as **community-based groups, youth collectives, municipal services or thematic networks**. At the same time, there is a limit to how far the circle can be expanded without losing focus. The question is not to bring in as many partners as possible, but to ensure that those who are essential for a given issue or community are truly present and able to contribute.

The way the partnership prepares for and manages **moments of transition** strongly influences its long-term effectiveness. Changes in staff, in volunteers, in leadership or in external conditions are inevitable. If these shifts are treated as exceptional crises, much of what has been learned can be lost; if they are anticipated as part of

normal life, they become occasions to consolidate what is valuable and to correct what is not working. This can mean establishing simple handover practices when key people leave, holding joint reflections at the end of a major project to decide what should continue and what should stop, or revisiting the role of the partnership when the political or social environment alters. In all cases, the aim is to ensure that **the capacity to work together grows with each cycle**, instead of being rebuilt from the beginning whenever circumstances change.

7.3 Future opportunities for improvement and development

In the coming years, volunteering partnerships among NGOs will operate in a context marked by environmental crisis, social polarisation, digital transformation and increasing pressure on civic space. These conditions make cooperation more demanding, but they also create space to rethink roles, methods and responsibilities. The challenge is to adapt to these changes while **preserving core values of solidarity, justice and accountability**, and to use volunteering as **one element within broader strategies for social change**, not as a quick fix for structural problems.

One clear direction is the move towards **more genuinely locally led cooperation**. Many partnerships already state that local NGOs and communities are central, yet decision-making power, control over resources and public representation often remain concentrated in larger, better resourced actors. Future practice can go further by setting **explicit pathways for shifting leadership**: for example, planning when and how coordination roles, budget management and external representation will be handed over to local organisations as capacity and confidence grow. This also implies accepting that local actors may set different priorities or use different methods than those favoured in institutional or European spaces, and being ready to adjust partnership agendas in response.

Digitalisation offers another field where choices will matter. Online platforms, remote collaboration and virtual forms of volunteering can help maintain regular contact across distances, open participation to people who cannot travel and

facilitate more dynamic sharing of knowledge and resources. At the same time, digital tools risk deepening inequalities when connectivity, equipment or skills are unevenly distributed. Partnerships will need to decide together which tools are worth investing in, how to ensure that all partners can use them safely and comfortably, and how to integrate digital security and data protection into everyday practice. A key point is to avoid letting online formats replace the slow, trust-building interactions that still depend on in-person contact, and to ensure that people whose participation is primarily offline are not left out.

There is growing scope to link volunteering more closely with **community organising and policy change**. Up to now, many collaborations have concentrated on service delivery or short-term projects, while advocacy and local mobilisation followed separate channels. A more integrated approach would encourage volunteers and staff to document patterns they see on the ground, identify recurring barriers faced by communities, and feed this analysis into dialogues with institutions or into joint campaigns. From the start, partners can agree how learning from volunteering will inform organisational advocacy, and how policy decisions will be brought back and discussed with those directly affected. In this perspective, volunteering contributes not only to addressing immediate needs, but also to questioning the structures that create those needs.

Attention to **intersectionality and diversity** will also need to become more concrete. Social positions shaped by gender, race, class, disability, migration status, age and other factors influence who can volunteer, who is invited into partnerships, whose expertise is heard and who benefits from outcomes. Future work will require systematic questions about who is present and who is missing in partnership spaces, which barriers prevent certain groups from engaging, and which adjustments are necessary to broaden participation in a meaningful way. This can involve different communication strategies, adapted conditions for involvement, specific support measures and changes in internal culture. Crucially, it implies listening carefully to those who experience multiple forms of exclusion and allowing their perspectives to reshape programme design and implementation, rather than treating diversity as a purely numerical issue.

Partnerships themselves can develop further as **structured spaces for peer learning**. Many NGOs, especially at the local level, confront similar dilemmas alone: how to balance donor requirements and community priorities, how to react when volunteers risk substituting paid work, how to handle safeguarding incidents, or how to address tensions between partners. Creating regular exchanges, small thematic groups or joint reflection notes can bring these questions into the open and allow organisations to recognise that certain difficulties are shared, not personal failures. When handled with care, this kind of mutual learning builds **collective capacity to respond to complex situations**, reduces isolation and helps normalise higher standards of practice.

Resource and funding models are another domain where change is both possible and necessary. Existing schemes frequently emphasise short project cycles, tight administrative control and visible outputs, while underestimating the time and cost of relationship-building, coordination, safeguarding and learning. Partnerships can work together to argue for more realistic funding conditions, including support for core costs, flexibility to adapt activities when contexts change, and explicit recognition of partnership management and volunteer coordination as legitimate budget items. In parallel, they may experiment with small internal solidarity funds for local organisations in crisis, or with co-investment in shared systems and tools that remain in place beyond individual projects. Such arrangements make it easier to maintain continuity and to protect the most fragile actors within the partnership.

There is room to revise **how success is described and communicated**. Standard narratives around volunteering and partnership often rely on simplified stories of 'impact' that satisfy reporting needs but do not reflect the complexity, limits and contradictions of real processes. Alternative approaches would aim for more nuanced forms of reporting, recognising both achievements and difficulties, valuing small but significant shifts in relationships or practice, and being honest about mistakes and unintended effects. Moving in this direction requires courage, but it can also build greater credibility with communities, volunteers, donors and public institutions, and open a more serious conversation about what responsible cooperation actually entails.

8. Annexes

8.1 Glossary of key terms

Volunteering partnership

Formal collaboration between two or more NGOs that work together to design, implement and monitor volunteering activities, sharing responsibilities, decision-making, knowledge, risks and resources in order to respond to identified community needs.

Local NGO

Non-governmental organisation rooted in a specific territory or community, with direct knowledge of local realities and relationships of trust with beneficiaries, community groups and institutions. In volunteering partnerships, local NGOs usually act as host organisations and main reference point for communities.

Lead organisation

NGO or institution that assumes primary responsibility for overall coordination of the partnership. Typical functions include project management, contractual and financial relations with funders, coordination of international partners and consolidation of reporting. The lead organisation does not replace the role of local NGOs in defining needs and priorities.

Host organisation

Organisation, usually a local NGO, that receives volunteers on a daily basis, provides tasks, supervision and mentoring, and maintains direct contact with communities and beneficiaries. Host organisations carry a significant share of relational, ethical and reputational responsibility within the partnership.

Supporting / sending organisation

Organisation that prepares, supports and follows up volunteers before, during and after their placement, often in the country of origin. It may offer training, mentoring

European Solidarity Corps (ESC)

European Union programme that funds and supports cross-border and in-country solidarity activities, including volunteering projects for young people. It establishes quality standards and specific rules on inclusion, learning support, participation, safety and project management that partner organisations must follow.

Quality label / accreditation

Formal recognition that an organisation meets predefined standards for participating in volunteering programmes. It assesses policies and practices related to volunteer management, learning, safeguarding, inclusion and partnership work.

8.2 Additional resources and useful links

European Solidarity Corps

Official portal for volunteering and solidarity projects funded by the EU, including programme information, opportunities and guidance for organisations.

https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_en

Erasmus+

Main EU programme for education, training, youth and sport, with sections on youth participation, mobility projects and cooperation among organisations.

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

Global Volunteering Standard platform

Online platform with the Global Volunteering Standard and practical tools to assess and improve volunteering practice and partnerships.

<https://forum-ids.org/global-volunteering-standard/>

EU data protection and GDPR information

Official gateway to the EU legal framework on personal data protection, including explanations, key concepts and links to legislation.

https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-topic/data-protection_en

GDPR legal text and tools

Consolidated online version of the General Data Protection Regulation with supporting materials useful for organisational compliance.

<https://gdpr-info.eu>

European youth and volunteering opportunities

Information on cross-border and local volunteering activities for young people, including databases of accredited organisations.

https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/young-people/volunteering_en

Global and European youth/NGO networks

Platforms that connect youth organisations and NGOs, share funding news and tools, and help find partners for projects.

<https://youthnetworks.net>

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