



Youth and Third Sector Consultation

InterNational Network

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

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Index

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Aims
- 1.2. Methodology

2. EU- Volunteering overview

- 2.1. Voluntary and solidarity action
 - 2.1.1. Definitions
 - 2.1.2. Policies and European programmes
 - 2.1.3. Regulatory framework
 - 2.1.4. Volunteering actors, sectors and main voluntary activities
 - 2.1.5. Predictors and motivation of voluntary work - social and cultural dimension
 - 2.1.6. Volunteering outcomes/impact
 - 2.1.7. Current challenges and trends

3. Youth participation in volunteering

- 3.1. Youth profiles and participation patterns
- 3.2. Motivations, engagement and perceived value
- 3.3. Barriers and access limitations

4. Host organisations and volunteering capacity

- 4.1. Types of host organisations and fields of action
- 4.2. Organisational capacity and hosting conditions
- 4.3. Constraints and operational challenges

5. Youth perspectives on volunteering experiences

- 5.1. Expectations, preferences and decision factors
- 5.2. Learning outcomes and working conditions
- 5.3. Integration processes and overall assessment

6. Organisational perspectives on hosting volunteers

- 6.1. Motivations and strategic objectives
- 6.2. Volunteer profiles and management practices
- 6.3. Experiences, challenges and organisational learning

7. Comparative analysis - Convergences, divergences and key influencing factors

8. General conclusions and recommendations

8.1. Main research findings

8.2. Recommendations for youth volunteers

8.3. Recommendations for NGOs

9. References

focusing on organisational capacity, desired volunteer profiles, motivations for hosting and long-term objectives.

In addition, the report aims to provide a comparative overview of volunteering frameworks across participating countries, identifying common patterns and key differences that influence participation and implementation. The findings are intended to support the development of more inclusive, accessible and context-sensitive volunteering practices.

1.2. Methodology

The study is based on a mixed-methods approach combining secondary research, stakeholder consultation and comparative analysis.

Secondary research is set to provide the analytical framework for the study, which was conducted to review European-level policies, programmes, regulatory frameworks and relevant literature related to volunteering, solidarity action and youth participation.

Empirical data were collected through consultations with young people and NGOs. Youth consultations focused on aspirations, expectations, barriers and previous volunteering experiences. NGO consultations explored hosting capacities, organisational needs, motivations and experiences. Data collection tools included online surveys, interviews and focus groups.

2. EU- Volunteering overview

2.1. Voluntary and solidarity action

Volunteering is considered to increase civic and political participation, cooperation and trust. Executed among third sector organizations at the local, national, or international level, they follow several European values such as democratic participation, combating social inclusion and discrimination, digital transformation or local, national, and international engagement, creating positive impact for volunteers, services users, communities and society at large.

but formal volunteering is more visible in statistics and in policy debates because it is easier to identify and measure.

On the other hand, EU institutions have also distinguished between voluntary activities and voluntary services. The 2002 Council Resolution defines voluntary activities as all kinds of voluntary engagement that are open to all, voluntary, educational, and beneficial for society. Whereas voluntary service is presented to be as a specific form of voluntary activity, characterised by having a fixed duration, clear objectives and a defined framework, combined with adequate support and legal and social protection for the volunteer (European Commission, 2010). This distinction has been significant in the design of European initiatives, particularly youth schemes, where service-type assignments need more protections than infrequent or short-term activity.

Civil-society actors use similar distinctions in their own terminology. The Association for Voluntary Organisations (AVSO) differentiates between volunteering (bénévolat, Ehrenamt) and voluntary service (volontariat, Freiwilligendienst). Volunteering in this sense can be occasional or regular, part time or full time, and its good practices includes to ensure that formal volunteers are covered by appropriate accident, health-care and third party liability insurance, that they receive appropriate training and management, as well as the reimbursement of all out-of-pocket expenses. Voluntary Service refers to more structured, full-time, project-based activities that run continuously for a limited period and place higher demands on both volunteers and host organisations (European Commission, 2010).

The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) provides a comprehensive and practical definition that is frequently mentioned in European policy discussions. Volunteering is defined as an activity that can take place informally, such as aiding in the neighborhood, or formally inside the frameworks of non-profit organizations; it can range from brief, part-time commitments to long-term, full-time positions in a variety of professions. According to this viewpoint, quality criteria include access to adequate accident, health, and third-party liability insurance, sufficient training and

management, and payment of acceptable expenditures (European Volunteer Centre, 2011).

Across member states, as in the EU level, no official definition is in force. Sixteen European Member states do not have created an official definition, yet common features are identified among official definitions as voluntary performed; unpaid; developed in the framework of non-profit and non-governmental organisations; have no professional character, carried out within non-profit organizations. At the same time, specific national definitions introduce specific features. Romania, Italy, Portugal or Hungary distinguish volunteering from employment; Denmark or Portugal stress that everyday helpfulness or spontaneity are not considered voluntary work; Czech Republic or Poland connect the volunteer's abilities and capabilities to the voluntary action (European Commission 2010).

International statistical standards add a further layer by excluding activities from volunteering. Based on the ILO Manual on the measurement of volunteer work, recent guidance specifies that volunteering does not include community service and unpaid work by prisoners ordered by a court or similar authority, compulsory military or alternative civilian service, unpaid work required as part of formal education or training programs (such as mandatory internships), or tasks performed for others during paid working time or paid leave granted by an employer (International Labour Organization, 2023).

2.1.2. Policies and European programmes

From the late 1990s, the EU progressively framed volunteering as part of its social model and of the free movement space, starting with Declaration 38 on voluntary service attached to the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, which recognised the contribution of voluntary activity to social solidarity and encouraged a European dimension through the exchange of information and experience, with particular attention to participation by young and older people. The line set there was developed in 2001 with the 'Recommendation on mobility for students, trainees, volunteers, teachers and trainers', which asked Member States to reflect the specific nature of voluntary service in their rules, to certify service carried out abroad, to prevent discrimination in access to social protection linked to mobility, and to avoid

reclassifying recognised volunteering as employment. Both texts place volunteering in the larger agenda of active citizenship and mobility, treating it as a form of non-formal learning and social participation that deserves recognition across borders, not just as an informal add-on to welfare systems (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2001; European Commission, 2010).

From the middle of the 2000s, the focus moved from recognition to evidence and mainstreaming in cohesion policy. In March 2008, the European Parliament underlined the role of volunteering in economic and social cohesion and invited Member States to produce regular satellite accounts that capture the value of non-profit institutions and volunteer work. The Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee reinforced this shift by pointing out the lack of robust statistics, calling for comparable EU-wide data and encouraging the inclusion of indicators for social capital and social cohesion along with the monetary valuation of time. This concern for visibility and evidence also prompted EU institutions to promote the use of common statistical tools, drawing on international guidance such as satellite accounts for non-profit institutions and, later, manuals for measuring volunteer work, in order to make volunteering more visible in national accounts and cohesion debates (European Commission, 2010; United Nations Volunteers, 2020).

The political cycle that followed resulted in the decision to name 2011 the European Year of Volunteering. The design combined a central budget with national coordination structures and prioritised communication, awareness and exchange through conferences, seminars and publications. Member States were encouraged to run parallel actions and EU programmes with a volunteering dimension were invited to support project activity, with Youth in Action and sport policies frequently used as anchors. The approach involved the European Parliament, the Commission, the Council's advisory bodies, national and regional administrations and civil society organisations, putting into practice the earlier calls for recognition, mobility, statistical visibility and coordinated support. The Commission's later review noted that the Year served to increase public awareness, develop new national policies, and inspire exchanges of practice; nonetheless, progress on legal reforms and data

systems remained unequal and dependent on domestic priorities (European Commission, 2012; European Commission, 2010).

At the European level, different volunteering programmes are offered to diverse actors. As stated in the 1994 Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recommendation on the promotion of a voluntary service, such programmes should in principle be open to all young people, recognised as a learning experience and backed by appropriate social and legal safeguards, rather than treated as a marginal or purely charitable activity (European Commission, 2010).

Over time, this political framework evolved into particular EU mechanisms. The European Voluntary Service (EVS) was established as part of youth programming in the late 1990s and 2000s, providing organized cross-border volunteering for young people with a clear learning and solidarity focus, as well as precautions against substituting paid jobs. It was later incorporated into Erasmus+ and supplemented, beginning in 2018, by the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), which combines financed volunteering, traineeships, and jobs in solidarity-related fields, as well as a humanitarian aid strand outside the Union (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021; European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). The European Solidarity Corps is controlled by Regulation (EU) 2021/888 from 2021 to 2027 and has a designated budget of around €1.009 billion to provide possibilities to at least 270,000 young people. The program focuses primarily on volunteering and solidarity projects within the Union, with its humanitarian aid strand open to volunteers up to 35 years old, and establishes a maximum share for purely national activities to preserve the cross-border dimension (European Commission, 2021a). Participation necessitates the acquisition of a quality label, which evaluates an organization's ability to provide safe conditions, learning support, inclusion measures, and meaningful tasks. The label comes in several forms (support, host, and lead organization) and serves as an ex-ante guarantee of basic standards across countries (European Commission, 2021b). With a single legal framework, a designated budget, and a quality-assurance mechanism, the ESC is the most formal embodiment of EU volunteer policy to date.

The Erasmus + is the main EU Programme in the field of education, training, youth and sport for the 2021-2027 period, aimed to support citizens in their personal and professional development. With a period-budget of more than 26 billion euros, it involves the 27 EU Member States and 6 non-EU associated countries (North Macedonia, Serbia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey). Created in 1987, it was originally established to create an organised and integrated system of cross-border student interchange. The overall responsibility for the programme's management, direction and evaluation lies with the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture), assisted by its Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in addition to the decentralised implementation of the National Agencies (NAs). Within this framework, voluntary engagement is primarily manifested through youth exchanges, youth worker mobility, and participation projects that use organised volunteering and non-formal learning to improve young people's skills, employability, and civic participation.

Along with Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, the Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values project (CERV) offers a horizontal framework for civil society organizations that frequently rely on volunteers. CERV's legal basis and programme documents state that its goal is to protect and promote the rights and values enshrined in the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights by fostering open, rights-based, democratic, equal, and inclusive societies (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2021c). With a financial budget of over €1.55 billion for 2021-2027, it funds civil society organizations, public authorities, and other non-profit entities working on Union values, equality and rights, citizens' engagement and participation, and prevention of gender-based violence (European Commission, 2021c; European Commission, 2022).

Erasmus + is considered to be one of the most successful EU initiatives, articulated in 3 main Key actions (KA): KA1, on learning mobility of individuals; KA2, on cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices; and KA3, supporting policy reforms. In addition to the Jean Monnet initiatives, that focuses on fostering education, research and discussion on European integration and EU policies. In total,

1.411.800 participants have been involved in the erasmus programme to date (European Commission, 2024; European Commission 2025).

These program initiatives are related to the larger EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which establishes the foundation for youth policy collaboration around three main objectives: engage, connect, and empower (Council of the European Union, 2018). The strategy's goals are to increase youth participation in democratic life, promote social and civic engagement, and ensure that all young people have the resources they need to participate in society, with solidarity, volunteering, and mobility specifically mentioned as key instruments (European Commission, 2018; European Youth Portal, 2024). Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps have been identified as the primary EU programmes implementing this strategy, translating its priorities into concrete opportunities for cross-border and local engagement, while CERV and other instruments support the organisational environment required for long-term participation.

2.1.3. Regulatory framework

At the European Union level there is no single code on volunteering among member states, mainly due to the diversification of volunteering action and voluntary sector, and because of whole country context influence (political, economical, cultural and social situation or volunteering traditions). Volunteering has taken different historical paths in each member state, depending on how welfare systems were built, how churches, unions, and associations developed, and how public officials perceived the role of unpaid work in relation to public services and labor markets (GHK, 2010). Voluntary action has remained strongly related to community-based assistance and informal solidarity in certain circumstances, while in others it has grown more institutionalized and integrated into contractual service provision or organized youth programs (European Commission, 2010). These path-dependent developments explain why attempts to create a single European legal category for volunteering would invariably intersect with sensitive areas of national law such as taxation, social security contributions, and employment protection (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law & UN Volunteers, 2017).

establishes a legal framework for EU-supported volunteering, setting rules for participants, host organizations, and funding. According to program assessments, this framework has increasingly led to more standardized expectations about what it means to host a volunteer under EU schemes in terms of preparation, guidance, learning agreements, and safety precautions (European Court of Auditors, 2021). Organisations wishing to participate in the European Solidarity Corps must demonstrate that they can provide appropriate support, clear role descriptions, and mechanisms to deal with conflicts or emergencies, prompting many to formalise internal policies that were previously informal (European Commission, 2021). At the same time, the Regulation specifically states that national employment, social security, and migration legislation remains in effect, confirming that the ESC acts in addition to, rather than in substitute of, local legal frameworks.

Soft-law and civil-society standards complement this regulation, helping to achieve a minimal degree of conceptual convergence at the European level, despite the lack of enforceable shared standards. The ‘European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers’ provides a common basis for understanding volunteering by defining its main characteristics. In addition, it establishes volunteers as active rights-holders, and calls on providers to ensure equal, transparent access and inclusive recruitment (European Youth Forum, 2012). Many national youth councils, volunteer centres, and umbrella organisations have used the Charter as a foundation for developing internal guidelines and training materials because it articulates in simple terms what volunteers can reasonably expect from host organisations and what responsibilities they bear (European Youth Forum 2012). Its principles of information, participation, non-discrimination, and duty of care have been incorporated into handbooks, quality labels, and partnership agreements, particularly in contexts where statutory law only makes vague references to volunteering (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law & UN Volunteers, 2017). EU advisory bodies underline the need for supportive infrastructure and better statistics, noting that ‘volunteering is continuously changing’ with new forms and actors (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). The European Economic and Social Committee has argued that without reliable and comparable data, it is difficult to assess both the scope of volunteer

as social services, education, and emergency response (European Commission, 2010).

The third approach establishes a single, comprehensive volunteer law. All key elements (status, rights and obligations, host-organisation duties, paperwork, and basic safeguards) are integrated in a single text, which may include supplementary rules. This clarity can promote volunteering and harmonize public policies, but it also risks over-regulation if the law is too prescriptive or designed without broad stakeholder participation. Nevertheless, implementation capacity remains a key challenge, where country experiences such as North Macedonia (clarifying framework) versus Moldova (concerns about excessive constraints) illustrate the trade-offs.

Evidence from countries that have recently adopted or revised comprehensive volunteer laws suggests that the impact of such legislation is heavily dependent on how far administrative procedures, reporting requirements, and supervision mechanisms are aligned with the actual capacities of volunteer-involving organizations. Where duties are excessively complicated or unclear, small associations may struggle to comply, and certain kinds of informal or community-based volunteering may withdraw from official institutions, undermining the initial goal of increasing involvement. In contrast, when regulations are formed via comprehensive consultation and followed by practical advice, they may give clarity on rights and obligations without imposing excessive costs, thus helping to stabilize the status of volunteering within public policy. (United Nations Volunteers, 2015; International Center for Not-for-profit Law & UN Volunteers, 2017).

2.1.4. Volunteering actors, sectors and main voluntary activities

Volunteering can be understood as a concrete journey of solidarity in which individuals and associations detect human, social or environmental needs and act to address them through a non-profit or community initiative. Volunteering is also frequently defined in institutional documents as unpaid, non-compulsory work performed for people other than the volunteer's immediate family, either through an organization or directly, emphasizing free choice, lack of remuneration, and public benefit (GHK, 2010; International Labour Organization, 2011). These definitional

elements help to distinguish volunteering from other types of unpaid activity, such as informal household assistance or mandatory community service mandated by courts or education systems (International Labour Organization, 2011; United Nations Volunteers, 2015).

This commitment operates across public, private and civic spheres and concentrates in areas close to daily life: sport and physical activity; social welfare, health and care; faith-based activity; culture and the arts; recreation and leisure; and education, training and research. European comparative studies typically divide these fields into broader sectors such as culture and recreation, education and research, health, social services, the environment, and advocacy, allowing national data on volunteer activities to be compared using a common framework (GHK, 2010). Using these broader sectors also reflects the reality that volunteering is enmeshed in the larger structure of the non-profit or third sector, where organizations are classified according to their primary field of activity rather than the mix of roles that volunteers actually do.

Two actors are needed for voluntary work: volunteers and volunteering providers. European analyses highlight that this relationship is constitutive, since volunteers contribute time and initiative, while organizations provide structure, legal responsibility, and a link to larger policy and funding environments (European Youth Forum, 2012).

By one hand, a volunteer is a person who freely participates in activities benefiting society. These activities are carried out for a non-profit purpose, which benefits the volunteer's personal growth as they devote their time and energy to the greater good without financial compensation. According to the international statistical standard, this excludes activities performed under legal obligation or as a formal employment substitute, but it does include both organization-based and so-called 'direct' volunteering, as long as no wage-like payment is expected (International Labour Organization, 2011). By the other hand, volunteering providers include autonomous, self-governing non-profit organizations and state bodies. They are active in the public sphere, and their actions must at least partially benefit the public good. The European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers

emphasizes that such providers are expected to offer clear information, adequate support, and, where appropriate, insurance and safe working conditions, so that volunteers can exercise their role in fair and transparent arrangements (European Youth Forum, 2012). This dynamic approach is commonly employed in European analyses and demonstrates how individual commitment and organizational contexts impact voluntary activity. Volunteers provide time, talents, and initiative, while providers plan events, handle legal issues, and function as a liaison between volunteers, recipients, and government officials. The nature of this connection determines not just how activities are carried out but also how long-term and accountable volunteer involvement may be (European Commission, 2011; European Youth Forum, 2012).

In many European nations, this collaborative structure is reinforced by intermediary infrastructures such as volunteer centers, umbrella organizations, and networks that support both sides of the interaction. These intermediate entities act as mediators between volunteers and providers, give training and guidance, provide common tools, and occasionally represent the sector in policy discussions with public authorities (GHK, 2010). Their existence or absence can have a substantial impact on how simple it is for individuals to locate relevant opportunities and for organizations, particularly small ones, to obtain information on best practices, legal requirements, and financing. Mapping exercises conducted in the context of the 2011 European Year of Volunteering show that countries with stronger intermediary structures tend to have more institutionalized channels for matching volunteers and organizations, even if overall participation levels continue to depend on many other factors. (European Commission, 2012).

Therefore, volunteering activities are undertaken by volunteers for a non-profit cause and do not replace paid staff. This distinction is explicitly underlined in several European policy documents and codes of practice, which state that volunteers should complement rather than systematically replace salaried workers, in order to avoid undermining existing labour standards (European Commission, 2010). The activity can be done within the framework of a volunteering provider or through a volunteer's own initiative. Volunteers perform a broad set of functions, ranging from handling administration and logistics; work directly with people

through mentoring, visiting, coaching or accompaniment; they prepare and support projects; they take managerial and coordination roles; they participate in campaigning and lobbying; and they plan and deliver events. Nevertheless, the distribution of tasks is not uniform, it varies across countries and organisations according to tradition, capacity and policy context (European Commission, 2011; European Youth Forum, 2012).

According to European studies, volunteers are frequently active in internal governance, such as serving on boards, general assemblies, and advisory committees, where they help to define priorities and assess organizational performance (GHK, 2010). Volunteers often serve as service providers, members, and co-governors in membership-based organizations and cooperatives. Volunteers' roles vary depending on the organization and sector, with some focusing on face-to-face support or event management, while others focus on advocacy, campaigning, or strategic oversight (European Commission, 2011).

Those activities are provided by a diverse range of voluntary organisations, including non-profit, charities, associations, clubs, unions and public benefit organisations. Furthermore, they include a variety of organisational forms such as trade unions, foundations, village, professional or business associations, or sports or singing clubs among many others. In practice, those voluntary organisations run from small, community-based groups built on mutual help and solidarity to more formal agencies with paid staff, more rules and market-style pressures (Milligan and Fyfe, 2005; European Commission, 2011).

There is no reliable sector breakdown or EU-wide figure of volunteer organizations. Depending on whether a registration is in place and whether or not groups are required to register, the numbers differ per nation. Even where registries exist, they often list active and inactive bodies together, so totals can be inflated. Furthermore, there is a turnover rate: in France many new associations are created each year but many also close, and in Slovenia about a third of NGOs are estimated to be inactive. On top of that, some statistics count all NGOs while others only count those that actually use volunteers, so country figures aren't directly comparable (European Commission, 2011).

economic, political, social and religious context, which in turn affects individual's ability to transform resources into volunteering) (Enjolras, 2021). Similarly it is often considered among academia that the dichotomy of unequal structural dependence between 'developing north' and the 'developing south' might have been at play in Europe's volunteering patterns between the Western and Eastern part.

In this sense, Kamerade et al., (2016), suggest that volunteering is an outcome of democratization, as countries with higher levels of civil liberties have higher levels of volunteering. Further illustrated by Enjolras (2021), that states that, at the individual level, human capital (health and education), economic capital (income), and social capital (social networks and connections) all improve the chance of volunteering, while at the macro level, there is a positive correlation between civil freedoms and volunteering.

Building on this, the 'capacity to volunteer' approach contends that volunteering is dependent not just on individuals' resources and dispositions, but also on whether institutional and cultural settings facilitate the conversion of these resources into voluntary activity. In this perspective, democratic rights, open civic spaces, and accessible organizations are seen as enabling conditions that expand people's real opportunities to volunteer, whereas restrictive regulations, weak infrastructures, or distrust in institutions limit the effective exercise of volunteering, even when altruistic values and social networks exist (European Commission, 2010; Enjolras, 2021).

Those variations in formal volunteering across and within European countries are related to a country's political, economical, socio-cultural and technological, often known as contextual factors, which influence an individual decision to volunteer. These contextual influences are typically grouped into a limited set of macro dimensions at the European level: democratic institutions and civil liberties; welfare and labor market arrangements; prevalent cultural norms, including religious traditions; and the level of technological and organisational modernisation (European Commission, 2010). These characteristics impact both the supply of potential volunteers and the demand for volunteer activity from organizations, making it crucial to consider them together rather than in isolation when analyzing cross-national disparities (Enjolras, 2021).

First, a country's political-institutional setting shapes how much people volunteer because civil liberties make participation possible. Democratization matters because it expands the legal and cultural space, where freedoms of association and assembly are protected, civil society can organize, people can join and act, and volunteering follows as part of active citizenship (Kamerade et al., 2016). Countries that consolidated democratic institutions and civic freedoms after transition show higher and more durable participation, while semi-democratic settings with constrained association rights display lower rates and thinner organizational infrastructures, as illustrated by Baltic states in contrast to the Russian Federation and Belarus.

Higher rates of volunteering are often related to higher economic security, which translates into increased number of organizations resources such as time or money, and therefore increased possibilities of covered needs by those engaged. However, as Inglehart (2003) argues, the *positive association between national economic development and formal volunteering is not always accompanied by increased civic participation*. According to him, a high level of economic growth causes two major cultural changes in values: a shift from traditional to secular-rational values, which is associated with industrialization and does not encourage volunteering, and a shift from survival values to self-expression values, which is associated with postindustrialist or knowledge societies and encourages formal volunteering. As a result, civic participation may not be much affected by a society's economic prosperity.

However, lower formal volunteering and civic participation are related to larger economic differences across citizens. In unequal societies where resources are not equally distributed, where different social classes have a higher role, and when the government offers less support for civic activities less trust and cooperation are found since it makes it more difficult to engage in voluntary activities as no shared common goals are set. (Damian., E, 2018). As illustrated by Lancee and Van Werfhorst (2012) that found that people living in a low-income household participate less in voluntary organizations and social life.

This supports the idea that inequality undermines the social basis of volunteering by eroding shared norms and limiting bridge links between social groups (Damian, 2018). In more egalitarian contexts, redistributive welfare policies and inclusive public services can foster greater generalised trust, making voluntary organisation participation more likely and less risky for people with limited economic resources (European Commission, 2010; Damian, 2018).

The socio-cultural domain influences volunteering development in different ways. The current tendency for independence and flexibility revealed a shift from traditional to episodic volunteers, more likely to engage in sporadic activities rather than in regular commitments, affecting as well the engagement in 'trendy' or personally-outcomes activities. Additionally, the increased social and environmental awareness has increased the number of civic participation.

According to European evidence, these shifts are most visible among younger cohorts, who prefer project-based or cause-oriented engagements and are less willing to commit to long-term, organisationally defined roles (European Commission, 2010; European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). This can create a structural tension between organizations that still rely on regular, time-intensive volunteering and individuals whose preferences are shaped by flexible lifestyles, precarious employment, and digital forms of engagement, requiring adaptation in recruitment and role design (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

The diverse public image of volunteering also affects its engagement. There is a negative view towards volunteering in post-Communist European countries related to the compulsory volunteering for state-controlled associations back in the Communist era. In addition to the low incentive to join welfare-oriented associations, as the majority of people in post-communist nations believe that the state, not the people, should address social concerns. Therefore, individual refusal of participation is often seen. In contrast, Western European countries (GHK, 2010; European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). As illustrated by a study carried out by Voicu & Voicu (2009), 'when analyzing the country variation of volunteering, one can easily see that former communist societies do not declare volunteering

behaviour as often as western ones, with a few exceptions, notably Slovakia and the Czech Republic. This legacy impact is not just ideological but also institutional, since decades of required involvement in state-controlled organizations eroded faith in communal institutions and created a long-standing link between 'volunteering' and political control (Voicu & Voicu, 2009). According to national reports collected by the European Commission, rebuilding trust in civil society organisations and distinguishing contemporary volunteering from past compulsory practices remains a major challenge in several Central and Eastern European countries (European Commission, 2010).

Digital technologies are altering the forms and rhythms of participation by enabling online and micro-volunteering that can be undertaken from any location and in brief intervals, loosening the traditional ties to fixed times and places. This flexibility can broaden participation for those with digital access and skills, yet it also risks entrenching exclusion unless organisations invest in support and inclusive design. The pandemic showed both what can migrate online and what must remain face-to-face, pointing to a durable hybrid model in which technology expands flexible roles while in-person activity stays central where presence and relationships matter (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

In relation to religion, different cross-national studies have reported that formal volunteering varies by Christian denomination, but the relationship is neither linear nor uniform. Several studies observe that countries with a strong Protestant heritage tend to show higher volunteering rates than in Catholic ones. This has been linked to an ethical discourse which 'discourage the pursuit of self-interest and induces a sense of social responsibility' (Lam, 2006) and encourage people to 'join together voluntarily as free individuals to fulfill various societal functions' Their less hierarchical, smaller-unit church structures also make civic participation easier. Catholicism promotes altruism and the common good, but stronger hierarchy and a tighter family–church nexus can leave less room for participation in independent voluntary organisations (Lam, 2006). Compared with Protestant and Catholic religions, in many Eastern Orthodox settings, a negative association with civic participation and formal volunteering is displayed, where close church–state alignment and a primary focus on spiritual life, don't promote civic skills or the

development of civil society, and are intrinsically linked to lower civic engagement (Damian., E, 2018).

When the emphasis switches from denominations to religion as a contextual element, the picture becomes more nuanced. Some cross-national research finds a favorable association between contextual religion and formal volunteering, while others find a neutral or even negative effect after controlling for individual factors and larger country variations (Lam, 2006; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006). There is evidence of a negative cross-sectional effect of religiosity at the country level, contradicting previous ideas that more devout cultures inevitably create more volunteering (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006). According to one explanation advanced in the literature, modernisation processes in Europe have coincided with secularisation and a general decline in the public role of churches, resulting in much of the voluntary sector being built on explicitly secular organisations rather than religious ones (Damian, 2018). Taken together, these findings suggest that individual religious commitment and certain denominational cultures can still foster volunteering, particularly where religious organisations rely on voluntary work, but that religion is now only one macro-cultural factor among many (along with welfare regimes, inequality, and civic freedoms) rather than a simple, uniform driver of volunteering across European societies.

The local social environment also shapes the levels of volunteering. Smaller towns often show higher participation because face-to-face ties make it easier to identify shared problems and act together, whereas larger cities generate more needs and thus more opportunities to volunteer. The overall impact of size is unclear if individual resources are considered: extremely tiny towns could donate less, and the gaps between medium and large cities tend to close beyond a certain point. The amount of space available for NGOs to grow might also be constrained in large cities due to the concentration of state entities. (Sundeen, 1988; Voicu & Voicu, 2009). According to EU national studies, local opportunity structures such as community centers, volunteer bureaux, active groups, or religious communities mitigate these size effects by giving tangible entry points into voluntary engagement (European Commission, 2010). In dense urban areas, high levels of anonymity and social fragmentation can be partially offset by strong organizational

infrastructures and targeted outreach, whereas in rural settings, rich informal networks may coexist with a limited formal associational offer, resulting in under-recorded but significant voluntary effort (Voicu & Voicu, 2009).

Several scholars indicate diverse individual predictors for voluntary work. A literature review conducted by Wilson (2012) shows that socioeconomic status, prosocial values, religion, and social networks like family or friends are among the strongest predictors of voluntary work. More recent work indicates that the type of social contexts in which people live is significantly associated with engaging in voluntary activities as well. For instance, the level of religiosity and economic situation are two main contextual characteristics found to explain formal volunteering or civic participation in general (e.g., Curtis, Baer, & Grabb, 2001; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006). (Damian., E, 2018).

With regard to societal/local resources and individual resources, those with higher social, human and income capital are more likely to perform volunteer work. Individual's social capital influences attractiveness for volunteer organizations, since they used to recruit members through the social network of their members, and on the other side participation in voluntary organizations contributes to an increase in the member's social capital. Volunteering also tracks human capital. People with more education are more likely to volunteer because their skills are useful to organisations and because higher schooling is linked to aspirations that include non-material rewards such as purpose and recognition. In addition, higher income is generally linked to more volunteering, as better-off individuals tend to have more discretionary time and a greater willingness to participate in unpaid activities (Voicu & Voicu, 2009). At the same time, volunteering can generate additional social and human capital by expanding networks, improving soft skills, and increasing familiarity with institutions, which can exacerbate existing inequalities if access to high-quality volunteer roles is uneven (Voicu & Voicu, 2009). This circular relationship has prompted some authors to argue that targeted efforts are required to create meaningful volunteering opportunities for groups with fewer resources, so that the benefits of participation are not concentrated among already privileged social groups (Damian, 2018).

Each individual has a unique profile of self-motivations for volunteering. Those motivations are translated into a four different profile classification of volunteers, based on traditional voluntary action, third party involvement and spontaneous volunteering, more specifically between enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation, obligation-based intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation: Regular volunteers fit the classic 'service to others' model within associations; Voluntary third-party volunteers act through an external sponsor, such as a public body, company or school, so free choice and personal/organizational motives coexist within a structured setting; Mandatory third-party volunteers participate under obligation or strong inducements (e.g., to maintain benefits) so freedom, remuneration and intended beneficiaries are broadly interpreted; Spontaneous volunteers self-mobilize in response to events or crises as well as political activism or fundraising, their choice is free and unpaid, but organization is loose and beneficiaries can be mixed. Intrinsically motivated activities provide a sense of autonomy, competence and connection (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

When choosing a specific activity, the degree of solidarity in each situation depends on an individual's subjectively perceived availability, rather than on whether they enjoy the activity, including both motivational aspects and relation aspects. Additionally, they must believe that they possess the necessary abilities and are capable of overcoming any mental or physical obstacles that the activity may provide (Doosje, 2018; European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). As stated by Haski-Levanthal and colleagues (2018), three steps drive perceived attractiveness of voluntary work to volunteers: cultivating a positive attitude toward the cause by showing why the organization matters and how volunteering helps; removing barriers of availability and capability by letting people choose when and where they contribute and by supporting their readiness; ensuring the experience feels meaningful and rewarding so they want to return. Therefore, efforts to develop the 'volunteering market' should prioritise how easy an assignment is to recruit for from the volunteer's point of view, rather than how convenient it is for the organisation (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

As concerns to the own individual motivators of volunteers, Clary et al., (1996) consider six main factors: engagement with self-important values; learn and build skills; gain experiences that support their professional development: to connect with social groups that are important to them; personal development and better self-esteem; and a protective function through activities in period of adversity (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). These psychological functions are largely in line with European survey data, which show that helping others, feeling helpful, meeting new people, gaining experience, and applying one's talents are common motivations across different age groups and industries. National reports highlight that the relative weight of these motives varies across contexts (for instance, employability and skills development are more prominent among young adults, while value expression and social connection play a larger role among older volunteers) so that effective recruitment strategies must be tailored to specific target groups rather than assuming a single, homogeneous motivation profile (European Commission, 2010; European Economic and Social Commission).

2.1.6. Volunteering outcomes/impact

The outcomes/impact of voluntary and solidarity action, can be categorised into five main areas: economic, physical, human, social and cultural, benefiting differently between member States and across different actors (volunteers, local communities and the direct beneficiaries of voluntary activities and services). However, despite the different outcomes across actors and countries, common benefits have been reported. (IVR, 2004; European Commission 2010). The European Commission's 2010 study explicitly distinguishes between benefits at the national level, for volunteers, for local communities, and for direct beneficiaries of services, while also recognizing significant variation in how these benefits manifest across Member States. At the same time, the Institute for Volunteering Research emphasizes that these multiple aspects are interconnected, because increases in individual skills or well-being may aggregate into greater societal and economic advantages when volunteering is widespread and sustained over time (IVR, 2004).

Volunteering benefits society as a whole in 3 main categories, which can be related to four main civic engagement perspectives. First, by raising the quality of life and

between people, creating a sense of security and acceptance for the giver as well as the receiver of the gift' (Damian., E, 2018).

At this level, it also contributes positively to national economies through the provision of extra human resources, in addition to the creation of social capital, improved 'quality of life', and improved professional skills, leading to an improved employability. Nonetheless, the lack of national monitoring arrangements translates into lack of data to analyse it (Damian., E, 2018; European Commission, 2010). According to a 2010 EU research, despite these recognized contributions, many countries still lack systematic techniques for monitoring the impact of volunteering at the local and national levels, preventing it from being fully integrated into policy planning and assessment. Nonetheless, the proliferation of methodologies such as volunteer investment and value audits, social return on investment, and impact assessment toolkits suggests that organizations and funders are becoming more aware that the social and economic outcomes of volunteering require more rigorous documentation (IVR, 2004; European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

Concerning the direct beneficiaries of voluntary activities and services, they often profit from the same benefits as local communities, such as intergenerational and intercultural dialogue or a better local environment. It makes services easier to reach and more varied, especially where money, distance, or lack of options are a problem. As volunteers know their local area, they can spot needs early, adapt activities to real situations, and reach people who are hard to reach. Moreover, as stated before regarding volunteers, it promotes social inclusion of beneficiaries; the socialisation of different groups, enabling beneficiaries to meet new people; and providing international and humanitarian assistance (European Commission 2010).

Studies of transnational volunteering schemes, such as the former European Voluntary Service, show that beneficiaries benefit from the intercultural and intergenerational exchanges that projects facilitate, such as new perspectives on Europe, reduced prejudice, and improved language skills. In many cases, volunteers act as bridges between services and hard-to-reach groups, helping to reduce barriers of mistrust, stigma, or lack of information, making support more responsive to local realities and accessible for those who are most excluded (European Commission, 2010; United Nations Volunteers, 2015).

2.1.7. Current challenges and trends

Although at Union level there is no single statute that replaces national regulations, there are reliable enablers that shape practice. With €166 million available for volunteer and solidarity projects, the Commission's 2025 call affirms continuity and size and indicates a persistent need for organized cross-border participation (European Commission, 2024). The European Economic and Social Committee (2021) notes that advisory organizations emphasize the necessity for supportive infrastructure rather than one-time campaigns, as new actors and formats emerge and participation forms continue to evolve.

While consistent, participation levels are steady. According to EU survey data, over one in five citizens regularly volunteer or participate in community projects, with significant variance among nations and age categories (European Commission, 2024). Volunteering commitments are more common in areas with dense associational life, while episodic activities are often seen in areas with thinner associational life. This trend interacts with demographics: younger generations expect brief, flexible jobs that fit employment and school, while aging societies create a consistent demand for care and community assistance. According to the European Economic and Social Committee (2021), the resulting combination is more about recurring, modest payments that accumulate over time than it is about lifelong commitments.

The fundamental existing infrastructure of volunteering is being significantly shaped by digital change. Although time and space obstacles are reduced by coordination technologies, online microtasks, and blended roles; presence in care, mentorship, and community organizing is still necessary. Evidence suggests a long-lasting hybrid model, characterized by maintaining in-person labor where trust, consistency, and embodied skills are crucial while using technology for matching, scheduling, and reporting. However, without focused assistance, digital formats can exacerbate disparities by favoring those who are already connected, which is why inclusion and design decisions are still crucial (United Nations Volunteers, 2018; European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

The common challenge of the national regulations of volunteering is over regulation. If systems are too complex or demand too much paperwork, people and organisations will step back. Laws should recognise different forms (one-off, short-term and long-term, and both organisation-based and individual) and set light, proportionate conditions for each. There should also be room for spontaneous, short-term help outside strict legal procedures. Some countries already do this: in the Czech Republic, short commitments are easy to start, while longer ones come with extra protections (for example, counting substantial volunteer hours toward unemployment benefits). Registration and reporting should stay simple, because heavy requirements burden both authorities and hosts. As cross-border volunteering grows, tailored rules for foreign volunteers (higher expense reimbursements and easier entry or residence) can remove practical barriers (European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2014).

Many hosts struggle with working-capital deficits, minimizing costs and outcome documentation. According to the European Economic and Social Committee (2021) and the European Parliament & Council (2021), small and mid-sized providers' ability to participate on fair terms is determined by straightforward reporting templates, transparent costing methods, and proportionate compliance). The 2025 Solidarity Corps call illustrates the opportunity but also the administrative demands placed on volunteer-involving organisations (European Commission, 2024).

As previously stated, monitoring measurements of volunteer work are still inconsistent across member states which restrict planning. Some countries provide accurate figures on rates and hours, while others do not, partly due to the fact that registries often mix active and inactive entities, and definitions vary. Even though International guidance exists (such as the 2011 International Labour Organization 'Manual on the measurement of volunteer work'), adoption is inconsistent, which keeps many comparisons fragile. International Labour Organization (2011) and United Nations Volunteers (2021) suggest that regular, comparable volunteer-work data should be strengthened in order to make participation and impacts obvious without burdening hosts.

people with prior exposure to volunteering environments or civic initiatives are more likely to re-engage over time.

3.2. Motivations, engagement and perceived value

The survey results show that motivations for youth volunteering are multidimensional. A large proportion of respondents identify personal and educational development as central drivers, particularly the opportunity to acquire transversal skills, gain practical experience and improve future employability. Alongside this, social motivations play a prominent role, with young people expressing a desire to contribute to the community, support specific social causes and engage in activities perceived as socially relevant. These findings are consistent with the narratives emerging from focus groups, where volunteering is often framed as a space for combining self-development with social contribution.

Engagement levels are closely linked to how young people assess the value of their participation. Qualitative discussions highlight that the perceived usefulness of tasks and the visibility of outcomes strongly influence commitment. When young people can clearly identify how their contribution fits within broader organisational goals, engagement tends to increase and is sustained over time. Conversely, when tasks are perceived as unclear or disconnected from tangible results, participation is more likely to remain short-term. The interviews reinforce this pattern, indicating that recognition, feedback and opportunities for reflection play a significant role in shaping how young people evaluate the overall value of their volunteering experience.

3.3. Barriers and access limitations

The analysis identifies several barriers that affect youth access to volunteering opportunities. Survey data indicate that lack of clear and accessible information is one of the most frequently reported obstacles. Many respondents point to difficulties in understanding how volunteering programmes operate in practice, including uncertainties related to tasks, time commitments, administrative requirements and living conditions. These issues are echoed in focus group

discussions, where participants describe the initial phase of engagement as particularly challenging due to fragmented or informal information flows.

In addition to structural barriers, subjective factors also influence participation. Qualitative evidence highlights concerns related to leaving familiar environments, fear of social isolation and insecurity about language or cultural differences, especially in international contexts. Time constraints linked to studies or employment, as well as economic considerations, further limit participation for certain profiles. Interviews suggest that these barriers do not operate in isolation but tend to accumulate, disproportionately affecting young people with fewer resources or weaker support networks. Overall, the findings suggest the importance of transparent communication, early guidance and consistent support mechanisms in reducing access limitations and enabling broader and more equitable youth participation in volunteering.

4. Host organisations and volunteering capacity

4.1. Types of host organisations and fields of action

The analysis of the survey responses shows that the organisations involved in hosting young volunteers are predominantly small and medium-sized entities operating within the non-profit sector. Their fields of action are diverse, covering areas such as youth work, social inclusion, education, community development and intercultural activities. Although most organisations define their primary scope as local, a notable proportion is also connected to national or European networks through project-based cooperation. This dual positioning allows them to combine local engagement with transnational mobility schemes, while also exposing differences in organisational capacity and experience.

Qualitative evidence from interviews indicates that organisational typologies are closely linked to historical development and available resources. Some entities have long-standing experience in volunteer management and are accustomed to working within European programmes, while others approach volunteering in a more

informal manner, integrating volunteers into existing activities without fully formalised procedures. These differences shape how volunteering is conceptualised and implemented, influencing both the roles assigned to volunteers and the level of support provided.

4.2. Organisational capacity and hosting conditions

Survey data highlight that hosting capacity is primarily determined by human resources rather than by physical infrastructure. A majority of organisations report limited staff availability, with volunteer coordination often added to existing responsibilities. This constraint affects the extent to which organisations can provide structured onboarding, regular follow-up and individualised support. Organisations with previous experience in hosting international volunteers tend to report greater confidence in managing administrative and organisational requirements, while less experienced entities identify these aspects as demanding.

Interviews reinforce the importance of internal organisation in shaping hosting conditions. Entities with clearer role definitions, designated mentors and established routines are better able to integrate volunteers into daily activities and organisational culture. Where such structures are absent, volunteer involvement relies more heavily on informal relationships and personal initiative, which can result in uneven experiences. The data suggest that organisational capacity is not only a question of size or funding, but also of internal prioritisation and accumulated experience.

4.3. Constraints and operational challenges

The analysis identifies several recurring challenges faced by host organisations. Survey responses point to administrative workload as a significant constraint, particularly in relation to reporting, compliance and coordination with funding bodies. Financial limitations also emerge as a persistent issue, affecting the ability to allocate dedicated time and resources to volunteer support. These challenges are more pronounced for smaller organisations, where limited staff capacity restricts flexibility and long-term planning.

Qualitative data provide further insight into operational barriers. Interviews highlight difficulties in recruiting volunteers with specific profiles or availability, especially for long-term or specialised roles. Challenges related to language, intercultural communication and engagement with vulnerable groups are also mentioned, requiring additional time and mediation efforts.

The findings indicate that organisational challenges are closely connected to structural conditions, and that sustained hosting capacity depends on balancing programme requirements with realistic internal resources.

5. Youth perspectives on volunteering experiences

5.1. Expectations, preferences and decision factors

Survey responses indicate that young people approach volunteering with a combination of pragmatic and value-oriented expectations. Preferences are shaped by practical considerations such as location, duration and compatibility with personal circumstances, alongside expectations related to learning opportunities and social interaction. A substantial proportion of respondents report that clear task descriptions and realistic information prior to participation strongly influence their decision to apply. Focus group discussions confirm that uncertainty at the decision-making stage often leads to hesitation or withdrawal, particularly among those without previous volunteering experience.

Qualitative accounts further show that organisational reputation and peer recommendations play a decisive role. Young people tend to rely on informal sources, including testimonials from former volunteers, to assess the reliability of host organisations. Interviews and group discussions suggest that decision-making is less influenced by formal institutional information and more by perceived authenticity and transparency. These patterns reveal a preference for projects that clearly communicate expectations and demonstrate coherence between stated objectives and everyday practices.

5.2. Learning outcomes and working conditions

The analysis of survey data shows that learning expectations are primarily oriented towards transversal skills development. Young people frequently identify communication skills, teamwork, intercultural competence and language practice as key anticipated outcomes. Focus group participants describe volunteering as a space for experiential learning, distinct from formal education, where learning occurs through practice, interaction and reflection rather than structured instruction.

Working conditions emerge as a relevant factor shaping the quality of the experience. Survey responses highlight the importance of balanced workloads, task variety and a degree of autonomy. On the other hand, interviews reveal that dissatisfaction often arises when tasks are perceived as repetitive or disconnected from meaningful objectives. Conversely, when responsibilities are clearly defined and progressively adapted to the volunteer's capacities, young people report higher levels of engagement and learning. These findings suggest that learning outcomes are closely linked to how work is organised and supported.

5.3. Integration processes and overall assessment

Survey data show mixed evaluations of onboarding processes. While a significant share of respondents report receiving some form of initial orientation, others indicate that integration relied largely on informal guidance from peers or staff. Focus group discussions provide further detail, pointing to variability between organisations in terms of welcoming practices, clarity of internal rules and availability of reference persons.

Overall assessments of volunteering experiences tend to be positive when young people feel included in the organisational environment and receive regular feedback. Interviews underline the importance of interpersonal relations and day-to-day communication in shaping these assessments. Where young people perceive openness, accessibility and recognition, volunteering is evaluated as a meaningful experience. In contrast, limited interaction with staff or lack of feedback contributes to more critical evaluations, even when tasks themselves are considered relevant.

6. Organisational perspectives on hosting volunteers

6.1. Motivations and strategic objectives

Survey responses indicate that organisations are motivated to host volunteers primarily for reasons aligned with their social and educational missions. Many organisations identify the contribution to youth development and intercultural exchange as central objectives. Interviews reinforce this perspective, describing volunteering as a reciprocal process that benefits both volunteers and the organisation. Strategic objectives related to community engagement and project enrichment are also mentioned, though usually secondary to educational aims.

Hosting volunteers is rarely framed as a response to labour shortages: instead, organisations emphasise the added value of volunteers in terms of ideas, diversity and community outreach. These motivations are consistent across organisational types, although their articulation varies depending on organisational size and experience with volunteering programmes.

6.2. Volunteer profiles and management practices

Survey data show that organisations prioritise attitudes and motivation over formal qualifications when selecting volunteers. Desired profiles are characterised by openness, adaptability and willingness to engage in team-based work. Specific skills or prior experience are mentioned mainly in relation to specialised activities. Interviews confirm that flexibility in profile requirements is often necessary due to limited applicant pools.

Management practices are shaped by organisational capacity. Survey responses indicate that many organisations rely on informal supervision and learning-by-doing approaches. Interviews suggest that where clearer management structures exist, including defined roles and mentoring arrangements, volunteer experiences tend to be more consistent. In less structured contexts, volunteer management depends heavily on personal relationships, which can produce uneven outcomes.

6.3. Experiences, challenges and organisational learning

Organisations report predominantly positive experiences with volunteers, particularly in terms of intercultural exchange and project dynamism. Survey data also reveal recurring challenges, including administrative demands, time constraints and difficulties in sustaining long-term engagement. Interviews highlight that these challenges often prompt internal reflection and incremental adjustments to hosting practices.

Organisational learning emerges as an implicit outcome of hosting volunteers. Entities describe adapting onboarding processes, refining task descriptions and improving communication based on past experiences. These adjustments are typically incremental rather than systematic, reflecting limited resources but also a pragmatic approach to continuous improvement.

7. Comparative analysis - Convergences, divergences and key influencing factors

The comparative analysis highlights significant convergence between youth and organisational perspectives regarding the importance of clear communication, meaningful tasks and supportive relationships. Both groups emphasise the role of guidance and feedback in shaping positive volunteering experiences. Divergences emerge in the assessment of onboarding and follow-up processes, with young people reporting greater variability and unmet expectations than organisations tend to recognise.

Key influencing factors identified across data sources include the clarity of information prior to participation, the availability of reference persons, and the alignment between organisational capacity and volunteer expectations. Structural constraints faced by organisations interact with individual expectations held by young people, shaping the overall quality of volunteering experiences. The findings suggest that effective volunteering outcomes depend on the interaction between

organisational readiness and youth preparedness, rather than on individual motivation alone.

8. General conclusions and recommendations

8.1. Main research findings

The analysis of the empirical data highlights volunteering as a structured yet unevenly accessible field, shaped by the interaction between youth expectations and organisational capacities. Participation is not determined solely by individual motivation but by the availability of clear information, supportive organisational environments and realistic alignment between tasks, learning opportunities and resources. Volunteering emerges as a meaningful space for non-formal learning and civic engagement when these conditions are met, while shortcomings in structure and communication tend to limit its perceived value.

From the youth perspective, volunteering is closely linked to transitional life stages and is often approached as a combination of social contribution and personal development. Engagement is strengthened when young people perceive coherence between their contribution and organisational objectives, and when feedback mechanisms make the impact of their involvement visible. Barriers to participation remain significant, particularly for those with limited access to informal networks, highlighting persistent inequalities in access to volunteering opportunities.

From the organisational perspective, hosting volunteers is primarily motivated by educational and social aims rather than operational necessity. However, limited human and financial resources constrain the ability of many organisations to provide consistent onboarding, monitoring and evaluation. Organisational learning occurs mainly through practice and experience, rather than through formalised systems, resulting in variable quality across hosting contexts.

The comparative analysis shows substantial convergence between young people and organisations regarding the importance of guidance, meaningful tasks and relational quality. Divergences arise in the perception of onboarding and follow-up,

with young people reporting greater uncertainty and inconsistency than organisations tend to acknowledge. Overall, the quality of volunteering experiences is determined by the balance between youth preparedness and organisational readiness, mediated by structural conditions and support mechanisms.

8.2. Recommendations for youth volunteers

Young people considering participation in volunteering activities are encouraged to engage in well-informed and reflective decision-making processes. A crucial first step is the clarification of personal objectives before committing to a project, particularly when the volunteering experience is long-term. Having clearly defined goals helps volunteers build solid and sustainable motivations, increasing their sense of confidence and preparedness and reducing the risk of disengagement or dissatisfaction over time.

In this context, access to comprehensive and transparent information plays a fundamental role. Details regarding project aims, specific tasks, expectations, duration, working conditions and available support should be clearly specified at the stage of project presentation and consultation. Providing detailed and realistic descriptions enables potential volunteers to better assess the compatibility between their interests, skills and availability and the actual demands of the project. Seeking additional information through testimonials from former volunteers and direct communication with host organisations can further support informed choices beyond formal project descriptions.

Another essential aspect is the presence of a clearly identified reference person within the host organisation. This individual should act as a constant point of contact and support throughout the entire volunteering experience. This role becomes particularly important when volunteers move abroad, as they often face unfamiliar cultural, social and organisational contexts, which can be challenging and disorienting. Having a reliable mentor or coordinator helps volunteers navigate difficulties, fosters a sense of security and facilitates integration into the new environment.

During the volunteering experience, active participation and strong bidirectional communication between volunteers and organisations are key to ensuring a positive and effective collaboration. Open, transparent and continuous dialogue allows challenges related to tasks, workload, expectations, or interpersonal dynamics to be addressed promptly. Volunteers are encouraged to be proactive, engaged and solution-oriented, contributing ideas and demonstrating initiative while remaining receptive to guidance and feedback.

Active involvement in feedback and reflection processes should be considered an integral part of volunteering. Sharing experiences, concerns and suggestions not only enhances individual learning and personal development but also supports organisational learning and improvement. Viewing volunteering as a reciprocal and collaborative process, rather than a one-directional contribution, enables young people to maximise both personal growth and social impact.

8.3. Recommendations for NGOs

Organisations hosting volunteers are encouraged to adopt a comprehensive and transparent approach throughout the entire volunteering cycle, recognising that clarity is not a one-time requirement but a continuous responsibility. Project information should be presented in a thorough and honest manner from the earliest stages, ensuring that no relevant aspect is omitted. Even seemingly minor details (such as daily routines, levels of autonomy, working environments or potential constraints) can significantly influence a volunteer's decision-making process. Full transparency supports informed choices and contributes to stronger commitment and long-term engagement.

This commitment to clarity should extend consistently across all phases of the project, including recruitment, selection, onboarding, implementation and evaluation. Clear documentation, realistic task descriptions and explicit communication of mutual expectations help establish a shared understanding between volunteers and organisations, reducing the risk of frustration, role ambiguity or disengagement.

A cornerstone of effective volunteer management is the establishment of constant, structured and bidirectional communication. Host organisations should actively foster an open communication culture in which volunteers feel comfortable expressing questions, concerns or suggestions. Organisational availability and responsiveness are essential, as timely support reinforces trust and demonstrates care for volunteers' well-being. Within this framework, as mentioned above, the identification of a dedicated reference person is particularly important. This individual should act as a mentor, supervisor and stable point of contact throughout the entire volunteering experience, ensuring continuity and personalised support. For volunteers, especially those operating in unfamiliar or international contexts, this role provides orientation, emotional reassurance and practical guidance, helping them navigate both professional and personal challenges.

Beyond communication, organisations should implement regular monitoring and follow-up mechanisms to assess both project progress and volunteers' personal experiences. Periodic check-ins, informal conversations and structured reflection moments allow organisations to identify emerging challenges, evaluate workload balance and adapt tasks when necessary. This ongoing assessment process supports a culture of continuous improvement, aimed at enhancing both volunteer satisfaction and overall project outcomes.

In addition, organisations are encouraged to actively integrate volunteers into a broad range of organisational processes and activities, rather than limiting them to isolated or repetitive tasks. Involving volunteers in planning, teamwork, events or decision-support processes fosters a more comprehensive and stimulating learning experience. Such integration enhances skills development, increases motivation and strengthens volunteers' sense of belonging and ownership, while also enabling organisations to benefit more fully from volunteers' perspectives and contributions.

Ethical considerations should remain central to volunteer involvement. Volunteer roles should be designed to complement existing staff and organisational capacities, rather than replacing paid positions. Aligning volunteer engagement with organisational values, strategic objectives and realistic capacities ensures

sustainability and preserves the integrity of both the volunteering experience and the organisation itself.

By prioritising transparency, continuous communication, structured support and inclusive engagement practices, organisations can create high-quality volunteering environments that promote mutual growth, learning and long-term social impact.

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