

Civil Society Europe position on the European Solidarity Corps

(20 December 2016)

This position has been prepared on the basis of contributions from our members. We would like to thank in particular AEGEE, Danubiana Network, EUNET, European Alternatives, the European Humanist Federation, the European Youth Forum, European Volunteer Centre, International Federation for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus, the Lifelong Learning Platform, Scouts European Region, and Volonteurope.

CSE members, are networks of Civil Society organisations, with member organisations present throughout Europe engaged in activities with local communities. These activities focussing on delivering social justice, developing a clean and sustainable environment and meeting the needs of vulnerable people rely on the skills and dedication of volunteers. CSE members value volunteering as an important way not only in which their objectives can be delivered and reached but also as a pathway to empowerment, self confidence, reaching out to others, being part of a common project for the volunteers themselves.

We find that the European Solidarity Corps proposal is particularly relevant in current European societies which are increasingly polarised and where people can feel more and more isolated. The initiative can also potentially contribute to a better understanding and sharing of the EU values and make feel people part of a common project that has relevance to their daily life.

However, in order to be successful we believe that the initiative needs to fulfil a number of conditions:

1) A participatory setup and implementation of the programme

We appreciate that a number of meetings have been organised by Commission services and consultation documents have been shared in order to gather a first feedback from civil society both at European and national level. However the very tight timeline for consultation has not allowed civil society organisations to properly consult their members nor to go through all relevant aspects of the constantly evolving proposal.

The European Solidarity Corps has been officially launched on December 7th and young people can already register, but we see that a number of issues still need to be clarified. It is not clear why this was done so quickly and there is a risk to raise expectations that cannot be adequately fulfilled.

Now that we are heading towards implementation, a real process of dialogue with different steps leading to an effective and feasible initiative that can rally as much

support as possible from the grassroots organisations who will provide the opportunities for the European Solidarity Corps must be put in place.

2) Integration in a broader strategy and adequately resourced

The European Solidarity Corps should be part of a wider policy strategy and framework to promote volunteering in Europe. This would avoid overlap and also allow to strengthen already existing and complementary initiatives such as the the European Voluntary Service (EVS), and other locally based volunteering initiatives that do not involve cross-border mobility.

This will entail that adequate institutional and funding means should support the implementation of the strategy. This is a timely moment as discussions are ongoing on the current MFF review and the new financial framework from 2020 needs to be developed.

Furthermore volunteering should be mainstreamed across European programmes such as the Structural funds, the Asylum Migration and Integration Funds, the EU external action programmes, the LIFE programme, the Europe for Citizen Programme etc and we are encouraged that this already seems to be taking place.

More broadly it also means that the EU and its institutions need to take a strong stand to recognise the value of volunteering and of civil society initiatives contributing to human rights and solidarity, which also means supporting and accompanying those initiatives in sometimes difficult national or local contexts, where for example volunteers assisting asylum seekers or refugees are met with hostility.

3) Focused on solidarity and human rights

The European Solidarity Corps must be based on the EU values as defined in the Treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. They truly contribute to building a sense of community and solidarity in Europe while providing a meaningful and empowering volunteering experience.

CSE supports the idea to focus activities on education, healthcare, social and labour market integration, working with migrants and refugees, resilience towards natural disasters and environmental protection.

The programme should also help improve participants' life skills, be an opportunity to experience active citizenship and help them acquire a critical insight into the problems they encounter. It should contribute to a feeling of ownership and sharing, overcoming language, culture, religious, belief or economic differences.

We are pleased to see that placements will be offered to young people both abroad and within their own country. Contributing to communities and regions within your own country can also be truly a European experience. In addition the European Solidarity Corps should also cover participants and placements from and in European countries outside the EU.

4) Quality Charter

We welcome the fact that the subscription to a quality Charter comprising agreed principles and objectives, commitment to certification and training by the host organisation has been accepted and that all the organisations that take part should previously adhere to this.

5) A clear distinction between volunteering and employment

Solidarity Corps participants should complement existing paid staff in all the areas covered by the programme. We insist therefore not to use the term “voluntary work” but use instead “voluntary activity”. Where volunteers are engaged, the primary focus must be on the needs of the people and the community they are assisting and not on the needs of the volunteer.

The Occupational placements should be in a separate strand of the programme and should be aiming at providing quality jobs and apprenticeship/ traineeship opportunities within the solidarity sector. In this strand, the needs of the participant regarding training and opportunities for increased employability should be prioritised.

6) Quality training, mentoring and support

Quality and dedicated training, mentoring and support, must be provided from the very beginning of all placements, and must be also tailored to the situation and skills of the different participants.

Participants active in the different areas covered by the initiative will also meet difficult situations and they must be supported and prepared to face them. They also must be given the adequate health and safety training and provided with the necessary equipment. It is critical that they are always given supporting tasks, be adequately mentored and supervised and never replace or undertake activities that require a relevant professional and technical qualification.

In addition, the mental and physical wellbeing of participants must be cared for. Volunteering or working in challenging situations or where people are in distress is deeply emotionally exhausting, and it is important that host organisations have a clear plan by ensuring the mental wellbeing of participants.

Participation in the European Solidarity Corps should also be a civic learning experience. Particular attention should be paid to providing participants information, coaching, and occasions to understand and discuss the political, cultural and historical context in which volunteering or work placement takes place, and be able to discuss what measures could be put in place to improve the situations that they are addressing (eg flood defenses, tailored reconstructions in earthquake areas, adapting education methods, breaking down people's isolation, empowering discriminated groups, ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities, etc). This will help to both acquire a critical view and perspective on their experiences but also see that long-term policy solutions are possible, and that humanitarian aid is a needed but only first response to tragic events.

7) The role of civil society organisations

In order for the initiative to be successful, it will have to take into account the experience and role of youth-led and volunteer-engaging organisations in coaching and managing volunteers, in creating a link with national and local level members to implement the programme. Adequate and financial support must be put in place. We believe that the initiative should be centered around those civil society organisations as well as all public entities involved in civil protection, protection of the environment, education, social justice etc. We are instead quite reserved about the added value of the private for-profit sector in this.

It is also critical that the European Solidarity Corps should be designed as an initiative to be integrated in the ongoing activities of Solidarity organisations at local level, as only they have the adequate knowledge of the local background and context and can ensure also long term actions in the aftermath of a crisis situation, which should also be facilitated by this programme. Host organisations must have a strong bond with the local community and a clear grassroots dimension in order to develop initiatives that better respond to the needs of the local community. Also the number of international volunteers should be carefully considered.

Calls for proposals should be therefore developed in cooperation with key European networks representing the organisations closest to the target groups of the initiative.

8) Logistical and Financial aspects

These issues have to be further clarified for the final proposal and the new legal basis. CSE members are ready to contribute with suggestions for the future arrangements for the coverage of costs encountered by Corps members both in the Volunteering and Occupational strands. In addition to this, training costs should also be covered. Furthermore additional costs that certain participants might encounter because of for instance accessibility issues, must also be taken into account.

The new legal basis for the European Solidarity Corps should go together with a new and own budget line for the ESC, without taking away funds from existing programmes covering the fields of activities in which the ESC is foreseen.

CSE members support the idea of a single one-stop-shop for participants since this would ensure a uniform and consistent application process with one single web portal, as the experience of the European Voluntary Service with sometimes contradictory national rules show and bureaucratic requirements. We strongly recommend that the process is user-friendly and accessible so as to attract a maximum of young people regardless of the qualifications, social status or disability.

The final proposal, once the pilot phase is over and a proper legal basis for the Corps is established, should allow organisations to become accredited only once and not require to re-apply each time for a specific project. Hosting organisations should be able to consult a database in order to identify potential volunteers for suitable roles that they can offer once their solidarity project is approved.

Finally some of our members regret that the programme is only addressed to young people and believe that it should be extended to people of all ages. The contribution of more experienced people, would be extremely useful and pertinent and also contribute to inter-generational solidarity. This could be reconsidered in the final proposal of the programme.

Who we are

Civil Society Europe (CSE) brings together 28 European networks of civil society organisations (CSO) working towards regenerating the European project around the shared values of Equality, Solidarity, Inclusiveness and Democracy.



Our main objectives: to facilitate and enable dialogue between European civil society organisations and policy-makers and help strengthening CSOs in their activities and relations with the institutions.

CSE is an independent voice promoting a space for structured civil dialogue and citizen’s participation at all levels.

Published contribution of our members on this topic:

[European Youth Forum and European Volunteer Centre and EAV](#)