



Implementation Guidelines - Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps participation strategy

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1. Introduction

Democratic participation is at the core of the identity of the European Union (EU), which is founded on values such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, as pointed out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union¹. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. Yet, across Europe, there are growing concerns about declining trust in democratic institutions, political disengagement and disinformation, and a growing awareness of the need to build a strong sense of active citizenship.

Democratic participation is crucial for strengthening democracy and increasing the involvement of individuals in shaping their communities. It is also of paramount importance in raising an informed, active and resilient democratic society.

Commitments at both national and European level, such as the European Commission Political Guidelines 2024-2029², highlight the importance of civic engagement and its role in addressing societal challenges, upholding values and strengthening democratic systems and freedoms. Practice and research have shown that the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes stand as powerful tools to engage and connect communities and millions of individuals. They cultivate a sense of belonging to the European Union, support active citizenship, and inspire civic responsibility through various educational, cultural and participatory activities.

'Common values, civic engagement, preparedness and participation' is one of the four horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. The present guidelines provide an overview of how these programmes can systematically support democracy, civic engagement, participation and respect for EU values, strengthening citizens' rights, solidarity and intergenerational fairness, leading to a culture of active citizenship. They serve as a reference framework for Executive and National Agencies, beneficiary organisations, applicants, and other programme stakeholders, to contribute to the quality implementation of the programmes' horizontal priority.

This document has been co-developed by the European Commission, the SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI) and a steering group composed of National Agencies' (NAs) representatives, with the involvement of the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and key stakeholders, including the NAs Participation Contact Points, beneficiary organisations, researchers, practitioners and former participants from all sectors.

2. Background

2.1 Policy framework and drivers

Participation is enshrined as a fundamental right in the Treaty on European Union¹: 'Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen' (Article 10(3)). The right to participate in democratic life is also captured under various civil and political rights derived from the

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012M/TXT>

² https://commission.europa.eu/priorities-2024-2029_en

Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR)³, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)⁴ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)⁵. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁶ additionally includes participation rights for children and young people under 18 that recognise their specific needs. Collectively, these international human rights documents, also adopted by EU Member States, promote rights such as freedom of expression and information, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to free elections. They effectively place an obligation on all states to ensure and promote participation in democratic life.

Over the past decade, the European Union has renewed its emphasis on strengthening democracy by calling on education, training, youth and sport sectors to help equip and empower citizens to shape public life. In 2018, citizenship was established as one of the **Key Competences for Lifelong Learning**⁷ for learners of all ages and education and training systems. Current initiatives such as the **European Youth Strategy**⁸ and the **Preparedness Union Strategy**⁹ underline the key role of schools, teachers and youth workers in fostering digital and media literacy and critical thinking, promoting civic engagement, and teaching democratic citizenship. The **European Democracy Action Plan**¹⁰ sets EU-level measures to safeguard elections, counter disinformation and empower citizens to engage in the democratic process. More broadly, the **European Education Area**¹¹, the **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027**¹², the **Union of Skills**¹³ and the **Action Plan on Basic Skills**¹⁴ identify civic competences, media literacy and digital participation as key skills for learners of all ages.

In higher education, the importance of democratic values is highlighted by the **European Strategy for Universities**¹⁵ while in the youth field, the **EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027** through the *Engage* objective of its 11 Youth Goals¹⁶ calls on Member States to create meaningful, inclusive spaces for participation. From the start of the 2021-2027 generation of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes, these political ambitions have been translated into practice through a dedicated **Youth Participation Strategy**¹⁷ and accompanying toolkits.

2.2 Definitions

In Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, the horizontal priority 'Common values, civic engagement, preparedness and participation' encompasses different terminology that varies across Europe. Many key terms are sometimes used interchangeably and in different ways by

³ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁴ https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

⁷ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/297a33c8-a1f3-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁸ <https://european-youth-strategy.eu/>

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_856

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2250

¹¹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu>

¹² <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

¹³ eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090

¹⁴ [Action Plan on Basic Skills COM 2025 88 1 EN 0.pdf](#)

¹⁵ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf>

¹⁶ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

¹⁷ <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/participation/ypstrategy>

different actors and sectors. To provide a common basis, a set of key concepts with broad evidence-based definitions are provided below.

a) Engagement

Engagement is a broad term that can refer to simply showing interest in or being informed about something, but also to actively and directly contributing to something. It has two dimensions:

- **Civic engagement:** refers to the engagement of an individual with the 'interests, goals, concerns and common good of a specific community'¹⁸. The main rationale for civic engagement is that it is central for community building and for strengthening social capital.
- **Political engagement:** refers to the engagement of the individual with political matters in general, and political institutions, processes, and policymaking, more specifically¹⁹.

b) Participation

Participation has a narrower definition than engagement, placing more emphasis on both active involvement and influence and on how power is shared. As a result, **democratic participation** refers more specifically to being actively and directly involved in democratic life, in a manner which influences the development of our society and communities. It has two interlinked dimensions that can be individual or collective.

- **Civic participation:** active, voluntary participation in activities that help address social and public problems in specific communities¹⁹. Volunteering is a key form of civic participation.
- **Political participation:** active, voluntary participation in practices that seek to influence political institutions, public policies, political processes or political actors¹⁹.

When it comes to **volunteering**, each country has different notions, definitions and traditions. Volunteering is mainly defined²⁰ as all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal. Volunteers act under their own free will, according to their own choices and motivations and do not seek financial gain. Volunteering is an act of solidarity and a way for individuals and associations to identify and address human, social or environmental needs and concerns.

c) Citizenship

The concept of **citizenship includes both a legal status and the dimensions of human rights, responsibilities, participation and identity**. It is important to note that non-EU citizens (i.e. citizens of partner countries, or refugees and migrants living in the EU) are allowed and encouraged to participate in the Programmes. However, not having the legal status of EU citizen can severely limit access to opportunities and to democratic participation.

- **Citizenship:** a legal bond between an individual and their State, acquired by birth or naturalisation, either by declaration, choice, marriage or other means under

¹⁸ Barrett and Zani in: Bee, C. (2017), *Active citizenship in Europe*, Palgrave/MacMillan

¹⁹ Bee, C. (2017), *Active citizenship in Europe*, Palgrave/MacMillan: 69

²⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0568>

national legislation²¹ that defines their rights and responsibilities toward that territory.

- **Active citizenship:** an active citizen is someone who takes responsibility for their community and society by actively contributing to civic and political life. Active citizenship involves a sense of social identity and solidarity with a community and society, leading to a commitment to active civic or political participation within it. Individuals who do not hold legal citizenship status in the territory where they reside (such as migrants and refugees) can still be active in their community²².
- **Citizenship competence:** one of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning²³. This refers to the values, skills, attitudes and knowledge needed to be an active citizen. It underlines that it is necessary for people to have not only the information and know-how to act responsibly and participate fully in civic life, but also a positive attitude towards democracy and beliefs associated with it. Descriptors for these competencies have been defined in the Reference Framework on Competences for Democratic Culture²⁴ and LifeComp²⁵.

Common Values: the six core EU values are respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights (including the rights of minorities). These values are enshrined in the Treaty on European Union.

2.3 Societal context and rationales for participation

Greater involvement of people can contribute to strengthening democracy, as inclusive participation experiences, especially, but not exclusively, in political processes, help foster people's connection to EU democratic structures and values.

Active engagement and participation are widely acknowledged as a vital element for the functioning of democracy (Held, 2006), with scholars such as Verba and Nie even suggesting that there can never be too much democratic participation²⁶.

Fostering democratic participation of all target groups, including addressing challenges and barriers to engagement, is essential to ensure a fair, resilient and sustainable future for Europe. People's involvement in political processes fosters democratic awareness, shared values and legitimacy, but only if that participation is inherently inclusive. It has been demonstrated²⁷ that when democratic processes exclude people facing structural disadvantages, such as socio-economic hardship, geographic isolation, or minority status, these individuals risk further marginalisation, and trust in democratic institutions deteriorates. Thus, meaningful participation requires more than symbolic involvement; it must be substantive and empowering to enable people to develop agency, belonging and democratic legitimacy.

²¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Citizenship>

²² Lister, R., 2003. What is Citizenship? in: *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. Macmillan Education UK, London, pp. 13–42. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-80253-7_2

²³ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01))

²⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/rfcdc>

²⁵ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC120911>

²⁶ Study on key trends in youth participation and youth organisations' responses to them <https://rm.coe.int/study-tomaz-dezelan/1680b1fc4a>

²⁷ Political Participation of Young People and Democracy in Europe (2022): https://www.dji.de/fileadmin/user_upload/aejp/2022_DJI_YouthParticipationandDemocracyinEurope.pdf

This is particularly relevant for young people. Across Europe, voter turnout among under-35s remains lower than for older cohorts, and surveys reveal falling trust in institutions, rising disinformation and political polarisation. Yet the same studies show high enthusiasm for community initiatives, volunteering and digital forms of activism, all of which young people consider to be effective in making their voices heard by decision makers^{28 29}.

It is therefore fundamental that both the management structures and projects funded through the Programmes take the aim of strengthening participation into account. They are also encouraged to go beyond promoting participation by embedding participatory structures in their own work, where possible. There are multiple rationales for undertaking educational and mobility projects that promote democratic participation³⁰, summarised below.

- **Educational rationale** - Participation builds people's skills and competencies. It can help develop their citizenship skills, and increase their confidence, self-worth and self-efficacy, positively influencing social and democratic practices.
- **Empowerment rationale** - Many target groups, especially those from marginalised environments, are often overlooked and not listened to in society. They seem to have no voice and no power within democracy. Initiatives promoting participation empower them and redress exclusion.
- **Good governance rationale** - Increased participation makes for better and more efficient policies, creates accountability and transparency, and builds trust in governments. People better understand aspects of their own lives, and can provide important insights into the demand side of policies, as the end users or target groups of programmes.
- **Rights-based rationale** - Democratic participation is a fundamental right, and developing programmes and projects around participation helps promote and protect this right.

2.4 Building on previous experience - Youth Participation Strategy

Evidence from the 2014-2020 programming period confirms the Programmes' positive impact on the participation of young people³¹. In order to build on this impact and to achieve the ambitions of the EU Youth Strategy, a dedicated **Youth Participation Strategy**³² for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps was adopted in 2021. The strategy's key features aimed at embedding its principles can provide inspiration for strategic approaches to participation in other sectors.

i. Inclusive understanding of youth participation

- a. The Strategy defines participation as 'young individuals or groups having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity, and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, contribute to and influence decisions that affect them, and take an active role in the civic and democratic life of their communities'.
- b. It underlines the need to learn participation by doing, and to let young people take the lead. It also emphasises the need for inclusive and participatory design and

²⁸ Eurobarometer 'Youth and democracy' May 2024 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>

²⁹ Young Citizens' Views and Engagement in a Changing Europe <https://www.iea.nl/publications/study-reports/national-reports-iea-studies/iccs-2022-european-report>

³⁰ Moxon & Baclaso (2026) Quality Standards for Meaningful Youth Participation in Democratic Life, SALTO PI

³¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0395&qid=1753181631004>

³² <https://participationpool.eu/resource/youth-participation-strategy/>

implementation of activities, particularly for young people facing barriers to participation.

ii. Evidence-based approach

- a. The Strategy was built on research which shows, for instance, that young people are not detached from politics, and that many are in fact highly informed and active, but engage through non-electoral mechanisms (such as issue-based activism, digital engagement, and creative or informal public actions)³³.
- b. Its results are monitored through participatory and qualitative methods with a forward-looking approach (e.g. the mid-term evaluation demonstrated how further efforts should be invested in the creation of tools for achieving Aim 2, Aim 5, and Aim 6).

iii. Comprehensive aims with corresponding activities and indicators

- a. The Strategy's six aims – embedding, support, information, research, involvement and inclusion – are accompanied by specific proposals on how to implement them and measure achievements.
- b. Additionally, it is accompanied by a dedicated Toolkit³⁴ to support those working with young people in understanding and applying concepts and principles of the Strategy to their work and to Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps projects.

iv. Co-creation and steering with stakeholders

- a. The Strategy defines and gives target groups and stakeholders a role in all phases, starting from its creation to evaluation, including young people and EU programmes and other stakeholders and partners (European Commission, SALTO, research and youth work networks and National Agency representatives).
- b. A dedicated participatory structure³⁵ has been set up and will remain active until 2027 to support the monitoring, evaluation and advancement of the Strategy. It will also promote the achievement of the strategy's goals at a local, national and international level.

While the youth sector has benefited from a dedicated Youth Participation Strategy, other sectors of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps have also contributed significantly to strengthening participation in democratic life, civic engagement and EU values. Across school education, vocational education and training, higher education, adult learning and sport, numerous initiatives have promoted participatory approaches, civic education, volunteering and community engagement. Although these actions were not framed under a single strategic document, they have generated valuable experience and good practices that can inform and enrich a broader, cross-sectoral approach to participation in the Programmes.

3. Aims

These guidelines aim to provide support on how to meaningfully implement the horizontal priority at all levels of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes and reflect the commitment to strengthen democratic participation, civic engagement and awareness of EU values across all fields and actions. They address key actors and programme operations as

³³ <https://edoc.coe.int/en/youth-in-europe/7625-new-and-innovative-forms-of-youth-participation-in-decision-making-processes.html>

³⁴ <https://participationpool.eu/resource/youth-participation-toolkit/>

³⁵ <https://participationpool.eu/resource/steering-group-of-the-youth-participation-strategy/>

well as managing organisations and projects funded. More specifically, these guidelines seek to:

- develop and strengthen the role and impact of the programmes as instruments to foster democratic participation and civic engagement aligned with EU values;
- increase the commitment of all actors to the uptake of the horizontal participation priority, and embed inclusive democratic culture and practices both in funded projects and in Programmes' management;
- establish a common understanding of the concepts supporting this priority, including diverse forms of civic and political engagement;
- ensure that democratic participation is taken into account at all stages of the programmes' management and funded projects' life cycle: before, during and after the project;
- encourage and inspire beneficiary organisations and individuals to create projects providing competencies, information and opportunities which help participants feel empowered to be civically and politically engaged in their host and/or home communities;
- foster the recognition of the experience and competencies needed to promote meaningful and inclusive democratic participation (including removal of barriers to participation) and support programmes' actors in building their capacity to work with respective target groups;
- promote the development of a monitoring system through relevant data collection, reliable indicators and reporting tools;
- increase the visibility of the democratic participation and civic engagement dimension of the Programmes and its role in ensuring their high-quality implementation.

Progress toward these objectives will be informed by regular exchange with National Agencies and stakeholders helping to better understand the strategy's impact on programme implementation.

While these guidelines aim to be as inclusive and comprehensive as possible, they are not meant to cover all aspects of democratic life or civic space, nor do they prescribe how national systems should operate. Their focus remains firmly on Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and on how the opportunities offered by the EU can provide meaningful experiences of participation and act as drivers of civic action.

4. Programme mechanisms supporting the participation priority

4.1 Addressing the participation priority through programme actions and activities

To translate the aims of this strategy into practice, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps provide a variety of programme actions supporting the participation priority. To ensure consistency and coherence, the Programmes' implementation needs to be based on a **shared understanding of participation** that reflects the following complementary dimensions.

i) Learning about democracy

Funded projects can be used to support target groups in developing the competencies required for active participation in democratic life. Knowledge of institutions, processes and rights is the first step. Activities such as mock democratic processes can be used.

ii) Learning for democracy

Programme actions build support for democracy amongst target groups, promoting common values such as tolerance, inclusion, and respect for diversity. In this way, it is important not only to equip these groups with competencies but also to inspire them to engage and contribute to democratic life throughout their lives. Activities such as civic literacy modules and school-based initiatives can be used. Partnerships can also be used to develop strategic forms of cooperation which further build the capacity and quality of organisations or institutions that deliver this kind of learning.

iii) Learning through democracy

Funded projects can employ participatory principles, means and practices, such as co-production and co-design methods. This ensures that target groups are directly involved in project design, implementation and dissemination. Participants therefore gain practical experience of engaging in democracy and participation. In addition to enabling learning through democracy, this ensures that the projects themselves are run on a democratic basis. Youth participation activities, solidarity projects and learners' mobility are especially beneficial in this regard.

iv) Creating opportunities

Funded projects can support and create opportunities for the political and civic participation of project participants. Opportunities for volunteering and participation in civil society, such as associations and community initiatives, are a key part of this. Moreover, projects that facilitate dialogue between target groups on the one hand, and policymakers and decision makers on the other, can give participants the opportunity to make their voice heard on topics of concern or relevance. Participation mechanisms, such as citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, structured public consultations, and local municipal councils, have proven effective in many Member States. Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps can play a decisive role in scaling up these practices and improving their quality. Project applicants are therefore advised to identify potential partners in their proposals who will enable the projects to have a real impact on public policy/social life/ local communities.

v) Capacity building

It is possible to use the Programmes' actions to support the training and develop the skills of youth workers, teachers, project coordinators as well as adult educators or other actors. Dedicated training and mobility opportunities can enable these actors to build their capacities to deliver efficient and impactful projects. Such opportunities can also enable them to develop their own understanding of democracy and participation, ensuring that they are equipped to guide others through meaningful participatory experiences. In addition, partnerships for cooperation should aim to build a European community of participation practitioners, enabling peer learning and the exchange of tested participation tools across countries.

Embedding civic education and reflection modules in the volunteer training cycle could ensure that volunteering experiences are not only solidarity-based but also explicitly linked to democratic values and civic responsibility.

4.2 Embedding democratic participation and civic engagement across programme sectors and processes

'Common values, civic engagement, preparedness and participation' is a horizontal priority that applies across all sectors of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.

- **School education:** early exposure to participation fosters long-term involvement and creates habits of active citizenship. Schools can provide environments through which democracy is lived and experienced, presenting participation as a practice, rather than as a mere learning topic. The promotion of pupil voice and democratic practices within schools, such as school councils (not to be used solely for organising social or cultural events, but as student representative structures participating in decisions), civic projects and citizenship education, can result in shared learning to promote civic engagement and to experience democratic participation. In this regard, Jean Monnet initiatives for schools are especially relevant entry points. Furthermore, Erasmus+ can support innovative models such as service learning (combining learning objectives with meaningful civic engagement) and even pilot cross-border service-learning exchanges for schoolchildren. These approaches directly link education with community involvement and create pathways for young people to see themselves as active contributors to their societies from an early age.
- **Vocational Education and Training (VET):** the field being work-focused, it is important to encourage community-based projects where learners engage in civic initiatives related to their professional fields; while also including work-related democracy themes, such as labour rights, the role of unions, and the democratic potential of workplaces. Projects will need to frame the priority in terms of competencies, in order to be understandable for VET educators and administrators. Jean Monnet initiatives are relevant entry points in this sector too. The development of methods and approaches to incorporate the views of learners into the design, implementation and evaluation of VET projects also plays a role.
- **Higher Education:** universities and higher education institutions, next to their focus on teaching and research, play an important role in: i) developing democratic/citizenship competencies; ii) promoting active citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity, openness and critical thinking for more social cohesion and social trust, thereby protecting European democracies; and iii) preparing graduates to be well-informed citizens. Through teaching and awareness-raising actions, they support academic freedom, anchor European values in society, enable learners to become creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers and active and responsible citizens equipped for lifelong learning³⁶. The learning mobility opportunities given to students through Erasmus+ as well as capacity-building projects for higher education, provide a vital opportunity for the development of social and intercultural competencies, especially when incorporating volunteering or service learning in the learning environment.
- **Adult Learning:** this sector highlights intergenerational dialogue, civic education and democratic resilience, with particular focus on low-skilled adults and those less engaged in civic life. Next to courses on civic education, it is important to also integrate topics on democracy and civic engagement into other parts of the curriculum, such as health or language courses. It should be taken into account that learners in this sector often come from marginalised

³⁶ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf>

backgrounds may have had the experience of not feeling listened to by institutions. Consequently, extra attention should be paid to creating safe and welcoming opportunities for participants from this target group.

- **Youth:** this sector has a long tradition of creating opportunities for young people to engage in both civic and political participation. Youth-led civil society organisations, advocacy campaigns, national and local youth councils, as well as structures such as the EU Youth Dialogue, all play a central role in enabling young people to engage with policymaking. Alongside this, the promotion of volunteering through solidarity projects, and youth-led grassroots community initiatives through Youth Participation Activities and Youth Exchanges, supports young people's civic participation. These approaches are all underpinned by the use of non-formal learning methods and youth work, which significantly develop young people's competencies.
- **Sport:** sport has a strong potential to foster democratic participation and civic engagement, as it reaches diverse groups of people across all ages and backgrounds. Grassroot sports organisations provide accessible spaces where values such as fairness, respect, inclusion and solidarity are experienced in practice. Through participatory governance within sports clubs, and initiatives that address social issues such as discrimination or gender equality, sport can contribute to the development of citizenship competencies.

Concerning the assessment process, embedding participation across programme actions also requires a stronger focus on quality assurance. Individual feedback from project evaluations shows that methods for recruitment of participants are often generic, leading to random selection and limited long-term impact. Introducing participation-specific questions in **application** and **evaluation forms** would: i) help ensure that projects are intentional in their design; ii) target the right participants; and (iii) demonstrate clear links to democratic participation outcomes, avoiding the risk of superficial or improvised activities. This would also safeguard the credibility and accountability of programme funding, ensuring that projects deliver genuine and sustainable outcomes.

Participation also extends beyond civic duty to encompass **solidarity**. Many individuals engage in society through volunteering, mutual aid, or community solidarity, all of which contribute to civic engagement and democratic culture. Recognising this broader scope of participation underlines the link between Erasmus+ actions and the European Solidarity Corps, where solidarity becomes a tangible form of democratic practice.

Finally, participation should not be confined to a single generation. **Intergenerational dialogue** is crucial to reducing generational divides, preserving historical memory and fostering the transfer of skills such as empathy, resilience and civic mindedness. Programmes should explicitly support opportunities where younger and older generations can engage together, strengthening social cohesion and the sense of belonging to a shared European democratic space.

4.3 Outreach and multiplier effect

Many impactful participation projects remain invisible outside of final reports. There is a big potential to turn beneficiaries into role models and sources of inspiration by encouraging and funding peer-sharing events where participants present their civic projects to other groups or interested stakeholders. Beneficiaries need to highlight exemplary dissemination packages and communication strategies that ensure a multiplier effect.

Long Term Activities (LTAs) on participation coordinated by National Agencies, such as PEACE+³⁷, can also be inspiring examples. Communication campaigns are carried out to enhance the visibility and impact of initiatives such as the European Innovative Teaching Award (EITA)³⁸, Language Label promotion, and Erasmus Days³⁹, with the ultimate goal of promoting European values and active citizenship. Building on the existing foundation of e-learning modules developed on topics such as European citizenship, civic and political engagement, and cultural diversity, the project harnesses these resources to support the development of ambassadors and other key stakeholders.

Local authorities, as key stakeholders and beneficiaries, can also ensure excellent promotion of programme funded projects and their impact; cooperation with decision makers is key here. Cities and regions have public information bulletins, their websites, and a host of other channels at their disposal.

5. The role of project beneficiaries

Integrating participatory practices into all stages of a project's life cycle is essential to achieving the full potential of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes in providing high-quality participation opportunities and meaningful learning experiences. Participation should therefore not be limited to specific activities but ensure an inclusive space where everyone has a voice at every step of the project.

At the same time, participation can serve as the central theme of a project, particularly in initiatives addressing topics such as democracy, human rights, critical thinking, media literacy and the fight against prejudice and extremism.

5.1 Before the project

Involving beneficiaries early on improves project relevance and ownership, builds skills in co-creation and responsibility and prevents tokenism by embedding participation into the full project cycle.

It is essential to involve target groups early in the planning phase in order to ensure that the project reflects their interests, needs and expectations. Their perspectives help set relevant goals, design appropriate activities, select partners and identify potential barriers to participation. This early engagement ensures the project is tailored to their realities and fosters motivation for active involvement as well as a stronger link between their aspirations and the project outcomes.

The role of participant-led initiatives is very important. This is particularly relevant for Youth Participation Activities, where specific support is available for projects initiated directly by young people. Encouraging beneficiaries to take the lead in shaping project ideas and objectives ensures stronger motivation, deeper learning and more sustainable results.

At the same time, intermediaries play a vital role in enabling participation at an early stage. Youth workers, teachers, trainers and project coordinators should be equipped with the tools and methods needed to facilitate inclusive participatory planning. Training in approaches such

³⁷ <https://www.erasmusplus.it/iniziativa/peace-raddoppia-e-diventa-peace/peace-doubles-up-and-becomes-peace/>

³⁸ https://innovative-teaching-award.ec.europa.eu/index_en

³⁹ <https://www.erasmusdays.eu/>

as democratic decision-making, needs analysis, or digital co-creation platforms can empower facilitators to guide participants in meaningful early engagement, especially young people and participants with fewer opportunities. In this respect, clear guidance is needed both for applicants and evaluators on what 'participant-led' truly means, and how to distinguish between symbolic involvement and genuine co-creation.

Finally, the choice of host organisations and partners is very relevant in the context of embedding participation. Organisations that are themselves committed to participatory practices, such as non-profit organisations, municipalities, schools, or European and international institutions, offer environments where participation can be authentically experienced and reinforced.

Establishing guidance will help ensure consistency across sectors and strengthen the overall impact of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps in building a culture of participation from the very beginning of the project journey.

5.2 During the project

During the project, participation must go beyond attendance; it should mean shared power, responsibility, and creativity. Beneficiaries should be trusted and supported to lead, shape and reflect, making the project a genuine co-creation process. Target groups should be engaged not only as participants but also as active co-creators. This means they should have a say in the process, methods and content of activities. Their feedback enables flexible adjustments to be made and improves project quality. Moreover, their involvement supports empowerment and personal development.

A key feature is the use of non-formal education methods that are interactive, experiential and participant-driven. Approaches such as peer-to-peer learning, simulations, role play, open space technology, world cafés, living libraries, storytelling, forum theatre, gamification, or 'walk and talk' sessions allow participants to learn by doing and reflecting, rather than through top-down instruction. Digital tools (such as live-stream discussions, polling apps, or online collaboration platforms) can further expand participation opportunities, especially for those who cannot be physically present.

5.3 After the project

Even after the project ends, involving participants remains important – for example, in evaluation, reflection and dissemination of results. Their experiences provide valuable insights for future projects and help ensure lasting impact. Additionally, they can act as multipliers by sharing their learning within their networks, decision makers, or creating their own network of ambassadors extending the project's influence beyond its duration.

Beneficiaries should be supported to carry their experiences forward, inspire others and stay active in democratic life. Projects should plan for this from the start, making the 'exit' an entry into future engagement. One idea is to encourage small-scale follow-up initiatives like projects that continue locally with little or no funding as mini-projects or campaigns seeded from the main project, or to offer microgrants or networking support for continuation.

Helping participants to include their participation experiences as part of the Youthpass and Europass portfolios is an important follow-up action, as it would highlight competencies gained through civic engagement activities.

5.4 Institutional approaches to participation

An institutional approach to participation means that involvement is not just encouraged; it is structured, supported, expected and evaluated. It requires leadership, resources and a cultural shift from consultation to co-decision and co-creation.

Structures help to make participation processes more binding and applicable. One idea might involve making participation a measurable priority. This could be achieved through developing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or monitoring indicators related to participation (e.g. % of co-created actions, target groups in governance or consultative roles, piloting of project results, quality of participation).

Effective partnerships with institutions, especially at the local level, are essential. Beneficiaries should be encouraged to work with municipalities or public bodies responsible for education and training, youth, sport, civic, or social policies, ensuring that projects across all sectors address real community challenges while fostering bottom-up democratic innovation. Such cooperation would improve the credibility of projects, prevent superficial activities and promote the integration of non-formal education methods into traditionally structured environments, building the capacity of decision makers themselves.

6. The role of National Agencies, Resource Centres and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)

National Agencies (NAs), SALTO Resource Centres and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) play a key role in supporting the implementation of the participation priority across Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. Through their work in programme management, capacity building and stakeholder engagement, they help translate the strategic objectives of the Programmes into concrete practices.

6.1 Information and awareness raising

National Agencies and the EACEA play a crucial role in promoting participation processes within Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps projects. They help raise awareness among project coordinators and participants about the importance and benefits of meaningful engagement.

They can expand communication and information activities, also thanks to the involvement of Ambassadors and Alumni, with special emphasis on reaching hesitant citizens and inspiring target groups to take an active role in the democratic life of the European Union.

On the communication side, Long Term Activities (LTAs) can bring together a lot of NAs to implement a series of initiatives in order to achieve these goals. These may include a communication campaign on Europe Day, under the hashtag #EUvalYOU, using videos made with the contribution of NAs, which are shared on the social network on 9 May and during festivals like the annual Florence Festival of Europe.

Other relevant initiatives can include the launch of a dedicated website, social media and press campaign, or the promotion of learning modules on EU values and citizenship. Another example is the sharing of communication work at Training and Cooperation Activities (TCA) events, where TCA officers, Participation contact points and Communication officers work closely together to promote participation and EU values.

Other activities to broaden communication to as wide a target group as possible are one-off communication activities resulting from cooperation between NAs e.g. Graphic Novel on EU values or Short film on EU values (both involving young artists from different countries talking to young people), Interactive Escape Room (game), creation of EU awards based on EITA models, promotion through events (Europe Day, Erasmus Days⁴⁰).

SALTO Participation and Information plays a crucial role in fostering the capacity building of beneficiaries, together with NA staff.

6.2 Support to potential applicants and beneficiaries

By providing training, workshops, and resources, the Executive Agency, National Agencies and SALTO Resource Centres build the capacity of project coordinators and organisations to implement effective participatory approaches. They also facilitate the sharing of best practices and successful methods across their networks, ensuring that innovative and inclusive participation models are widely adopted. Additionally, Executive and National Agencies offer direct support and guidance during project planning and implementation, helping to integrate target groups genuinely into decision-making processes or consultative roles (during needs analysis assessment, piloting of project results, other evaluations and dissemination activities).

Executive and National Agencies and SALTO Resource Centres can support programme beneficiaries by:

- providing practical guidance and toolkits on the use of participatory methods such as co-production within projects, and on embedding participatory decision-making into the governance of institutions;
- promoting examples of good practice through case study databases and analysis;
- identifying suitable partnerships, especially cross-sector ones;
- developing evaluation tools, standards and indicators;
- providing mentorship, access to training and coordinating professional networks.

Furthermore, by fostering networks among projects, target groups and stakeholders, Executive and National Agencies strengthen collaboration and the exchange of experiences. Overall, their active engagement is key to ensuring that participation moves beyond a formality and becomes a meaningful, inclusive and impactful part of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps projects.

Through monitoring, evaluation and regular feedback, they encourage continuous reflection and improvement of participation efforts.

⁴⁰ <https://www.erasmusdays.eu/>

6.3 Strategic approaches

The promotion of cross-sectoral cooperation is essential both within Erasmus+ projects and at the level of programme implementation. This approach ensures that participation is not treated in isolation but is linked to areas such as education, employment, health and social inclusion. A good example are the Strategic National Agencies Cooperation (SNACs), which foster collaboration between National Agencies and stakeholders across sectors. Such cooperation strengthens the systemic impact of Erasmus+ and supports more holistic, inclusive and effective approaches to youth engagement.

SALTO Participation and Information plays a crucial role in sharing of good practices on national initiatives too.

6.4 NA networks

The NA participation network (contact points in agencies implementing the programmes) ensures greater coherence, shared learning and more effective implementation of participation-related objectives within Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. Coordinated efforts across NAs can amplify impact, avoid duplication and better support target groups' meaningful engagement in democratic processes at all levels.

SALTO Participation and Information can play a crucial role in coordination and fostering cooperation.

6.5 Training and networking for organisations, staff in the Agencies and expert evaluators

To enable a strategy to be embedded in project practice, training and networking opportunities must be systematically provided. Converting strategy to action requires clear communication and advice, including for expert evaluators. They play a key role in turning strategy into action: which projects receive funding and on what basis? Are sufficient and innovative participation actions recognised? On the other hand, are non-selected proposals guided towards taking the programme priorities and diverse forms of participation more effectively into account? This work would include, for example, providing a collection of good practices and encouragement to focus on participation, not forgetting networking with partners that are more experienced in exploring participatory practices in everyday work and project aims.

For instance, the Italian Erasmus+ National Agency INDIRE released a set of learning modules available online and free of charge⁴¹, designed for high school, university and VET students, young people, adult learners and anyone interested in exploring the themes of civic and political engagement and participation in democratic life in Europe. The video series 'Participate in Europe' (developed under the PEACE project – Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement) explores the founding values of the European Union, its politics and institutions, with a focus on democratic participation. The educational modules cover topics such as European history and institutions, EU elections, Eastern and Western Europe, civic participation and tools for democratic innovation, gender identity and equality, and civic education – also in connection with Erasmus+ mobility.

Staff of National Agencies as well as SALTO Participation and Information play a crucial role here.

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXH4liLvTcKbganQ8MZvwW2EsHxPg8IOF>

6.6 Synergies with other programmes

National Agencies and the EACEA may support beneficiaries in finding the most appropriate action (project format) for their project that contributes to the participation priority. This may be within the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes, or through other/additional funding opportunities. Other programmes, such as the funding schemes under the Cohesion Policy Funds, Horizon Europe (e.g. the European Research Council, Marie Curie Actions), the LIFE programme, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV) or the European Economic Area are relevant examples.

Where National Agencies are hosted by umbrella organisations covering various European and national programmes, they should make the most of this to foster a positive knock-on effect. This will facilitate synergies between the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and other programmes and initiatives, while also supporting the sharing of good practices on democratic participation and civic engagement.

7. Link with other Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps horizontal priorities

7.1. Inclusion and diversity

Access to democratic participation is not inherently equal. Patterns of marginalisation and exclusion in society, such as those linked to gender, disability or ethnicity, make it harder for some groups to engage in democratic life. Promoting participation is therefore inherently linked to inclusion and diversity, and it is necessary to take steps to remove the barriers that prevent some groups from fully engaging in democratic life.

Ensuring that projects are genuinely inclusive requires transparency not only in their objectives but also in their methods of participant recruitment. Simple references to target groups (e.g. 'young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs)' or 'young people with fewer opportunities') should be complemented with details on who the target participants are, where they will be reached, how they will be approached, and which criteria will guide their selection. This would help avoid superficial approaches to inclusion, ensuring instead that projects are designed with the specific needs, motivations and barriers of their participants in mind.

7.2. Green transition and sustainable development

The green transition is not only an environmental challenge, but also a civic one. Participation in democratic life and civic engagement must increasingly address the ecological crisis, where questions of justice, sustainability, and responsibility are central. In this sense, civic engagement in the 21st century cannot be fully separated from ecological awareness and action. Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps can therefore provide opportunities for participants to learn about, debate and act on how societies respond to climate change and environmental degradation. Specific areas where the green and participation priorities may intersect include sustainable travel, food and consumption and the circular economy.

Beyond practical aspects, the green transition also challenges us to rethink what participation means in times of ecological crisis. It requires people to act not only as voters or project

participants, but also as agents of shared resources, advocating for systemic change while adopting sustainable practices in daily life.

Finally, there are links to the preparedness dimension of the strategy. Building sustainable peace and resilience cannot exclude ecological sustainability, as climate pressures are increasingly tied to security, migration and intergenerational fairness. By embedding ecological considerations into participation activities, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps can foster a generation of citizens equipped to take part in shaping a future that is both democratic and sustainable.

7.3 Digital transformation

Digital tools can expand access to democratic processes, foster online spaces for dialogue and help participants engage in civic life across borders. However, a superficial approach to digitalisation should be avoided. Too often, digital tools take the form of generic online platforms or digital repositories that may prove empty, poorly designed, or unsustainable once funding ends. This risks diluting the impact of both the digital and participation priorities.

Moreover, media literacy and critical thinking are key competencies for participation in democratic life, and closely linked to the digital online world, given that this is where many people get their news. The Council of Europe's competencies for digital citizenship⁴² education and the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp)⁴³ are example resources that could be used.

To address such issues, clearer guidance and expectations for applicants are needed. By clarifying what 'digital' means in the context of participation, the programme can support projects that use technology not as an end in itself, but as a tool to deepen democratic engagement, inclusion and civic literacy.

8. Inspiration from practices and resources

Resources which provide access to project results, practices, materials and documentation.

1. Erasmus+ Project Results platform (<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu>) - searchable by topic, action, field, year etc. Good practice projects labelled as such.
2. ESC project results database (<https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/projects>) - access to all funded European Solidarity Corps projects.
3. SALTO Participation & Information (<https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/participation>) - training, publications and resources.
4. Participation Resource Pool (<https://participationpool.eu>) - a curated platform of verified learning material, data, practical tools and news
5. Overview of opportunities for EU citizens to actively participate (https://european-union.europa.eu/live-work-study/participate-interact-vote_en)

Inspiration from existing projects on civil and democratic engagement and participation at European level, such as:

⁴² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/digital-citizenship-education>

⁴³ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128415>

- Citizens' Action for Democracy (CitiDem) (CERV project): <https://citizenstakeover.eu/citidem/>
- Democratic Odyssey (CERV project): <https://democraticodyssey.eui.eu/home>
- LTA PEACE: <https://www.erasmusplus.it/iniziativa/peace/>
- Europe Goes Local <https://europegoeslocal.eu/home/>

Inspiration from ongoing practices of citizen involvement of the European Commission and the European Parliament:

- European Citizens' Panels: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/european-citizens-panels_en
- Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/young-citizens-assembly-pollinators_en

Other Resources:

The 'New Power in Youth' Strategic Partnership: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/new-power-in-youth/>

Within the outcomes of LTA PEACE, coordinated by INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, the section [Research reports](#) features:

- Erasmus+ for Civic Engagement with studies, results, ideas and proposals from the European alumni network and focus groups that took part in the international seminars (Naples, 2022; Malmö, 2023; Seville, 2024; and Lisbon, 2024) and are involved in the long-term European PEACE project on active participation https://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/report_finale_PEACE_2024.pdf
- You(th) and the 2024 European elections: a survey to understand the concerns of young Europeans which links civic and political engagement, especially among young people, to the European elections held from 6 to 9 June 2024 <https://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Report-Survey-fnl.pdf>

Participedia crowdsourcing platform (<https://participedia.net>): a global network for researchers, educators, practitioners, policymakers, activists and anyone interested in public participation and democratic innovations promoting effective methods of citizen engagement.

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