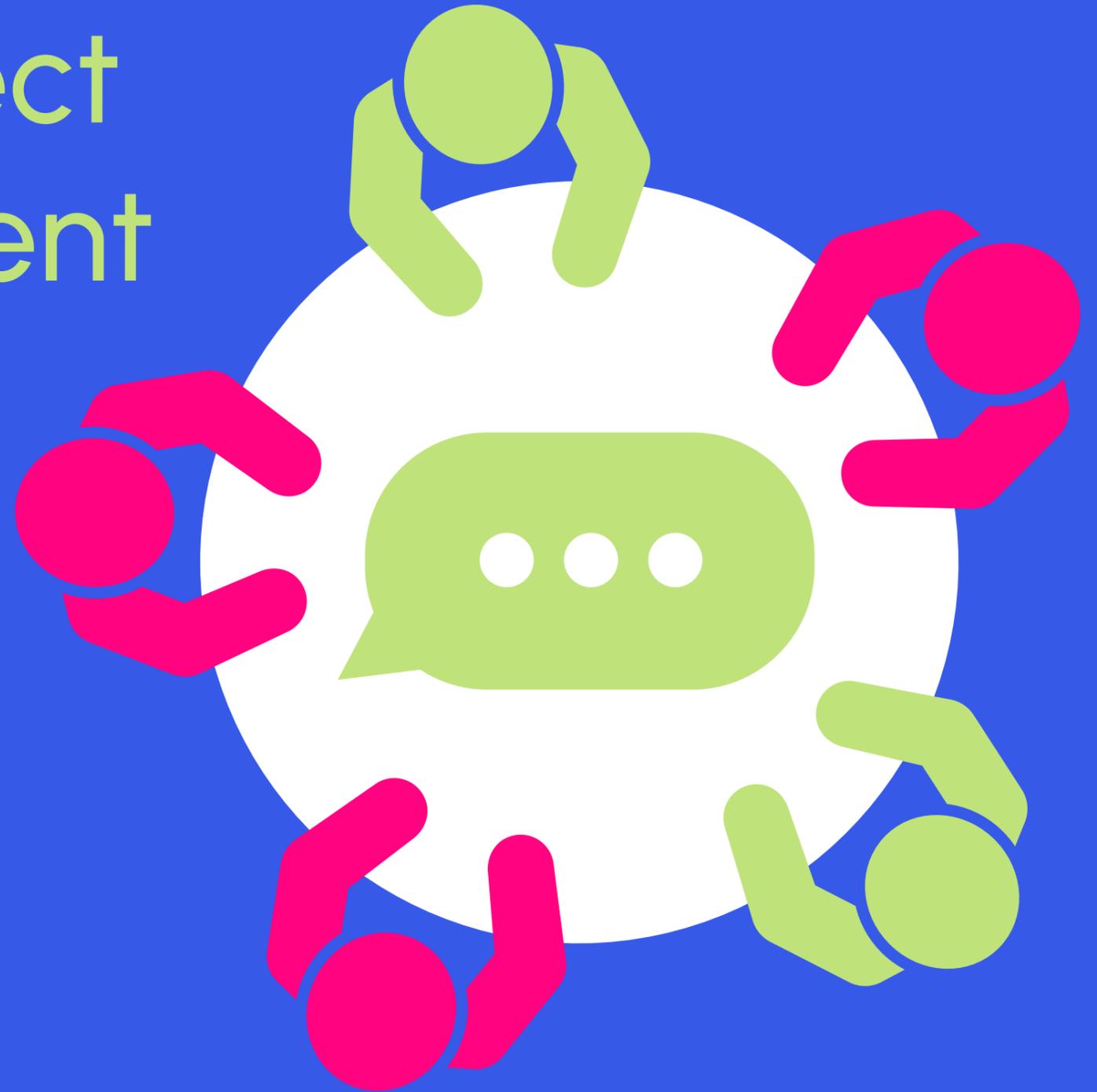




# Mapping of Direct Youth Involvement in the Work of National Agencies

Report / November 2022



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# Summary

## What is it?

This report presents the findings of mapping direct youth involvement in the work of selected National Agencies (NAs) for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps and SALTO centres (SALTOs) that took place in April-October, 2022. In addition, two observations of an involvement process were carried out.

## What is direct youth involvement?

Within this mapping, the direct involvement of youth was broadly defined as a NA or SALTO involving a young person or a group of young persons with the explicit aim of benefitting from their contribution when planning, implementing or improving an activity or a set of activities carried out by the institution.

## Why is it important?

On the one hand, the NAs and SALTOs are among the main stakeholders in their respective countries or regions promoting, training for and financing youth involvement. On the other hand, the end beneficiaries of the NAs and SALTOs are always young people even if the institutions carry their activities out through other stakeholders (e.g. youth workers, NGOs, municipalities). The direct engagement of youth to plan, implement and improve the activities of both streams

would be – if done successfully – both of a high symbolic and practical value to the NAs and SALTOs.

Setting the vision for and activating the practices of direct youth involvement is directly supported by the Strategic Partnership “New Power in Youth” (NPIY). The first objective of its work package 2 „Supporting the strategic development of youth participation in democratic life on local” is „Developing national approaches on supporting youth participation in democratic life, through the programmes, in cooperation with relevant National Stakeholders” that has a sub-objective „Engaging young people in the work and service design of National Agencies”. This mapping report contributes directly to the sub-objective.

## How the mapping was conducted?

The NAs and SALTOs were offered the possibility to participate in an interview to map the current status of direct youth involvement in their institution. The institution’s existing (good) practice regarding direct youth involvement was not a precondition to participating in the interview (as one of the aims of the mapping was to understand also the factors hindering the involvement). Altogether, 12 interviews with 11 institutions took place. The notes of semi-structured interviews were then qualitatively analysed. The analytical results were compiled into this report.



# What were the main findings?

As keywords, these are presented in the following diagram.

## Moving from current constraints...

- Lack of prior experience and role models
- (Perceived) difficulties of involving young people in current systems and work methods
- Insufficient resources
- Discouraging results from previous attempts

## ...to discover motivation and ambition

- "Walk the talk"
- Meeting professional goals

## Involving young people directly

- Youth representatives in existing Steering Groups and Boards
- Temporary steering groups consisting only of young people
- Permanent Youth Advisory Boards
- Working directly with local or interest-based youth associations
- Rotating Europeers as junior trainers
- Interns as "a voice of youth"

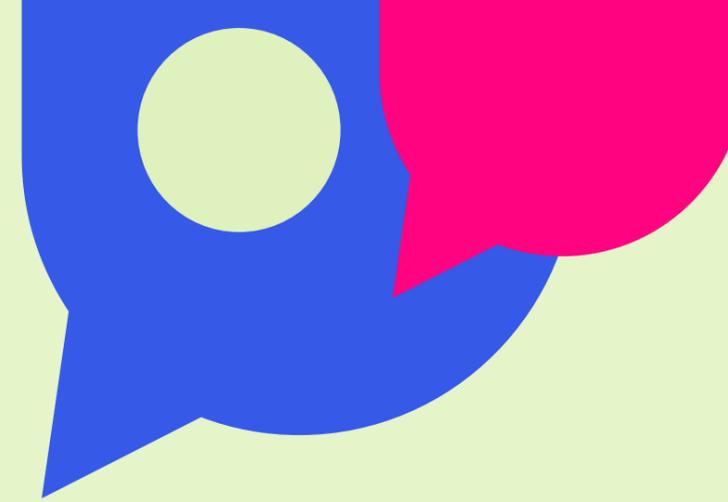
## What needs to be paid attention before and during the process

- **What are the conditions** the NAs should create when involving young people?
  - Relevant skills to empower youth and manage the process
  - Realistic ambitions and reasonable expectations
  - Sufficient clarity
  - Appropriate time frame
  - Dedicated resources
  - Reasonable expectations
- **How to** make the topics and activities related to involvement understandable and attractive to youngsters?
- **How to** balance the needs for experience and diversity of the group?
- **How to** overcome the busyness of active youth, especially when involving them as a group?
- **How to** keep the experiences of involving young people as institutional knowledge in the NAs?
- **How to** consult young people regarding the work of NAs meaningfully on the European level?

All the main findings are elaborated on in the following chapters and illustrated with direct anonymous quotes from the interviews. The most notable examples of direct youth involvement are presented non-anonymously in Annex 3



# Constraints and a way forward



**Several constraints** have prevented or currently prevent the NAs and SALTOs to start involving young people directly:

- Lack of prior experience in directly involving young people;
- Lack of successful practices and cases among other NAs and SALTOs (as most of the practices and cases currently considered exemplary are still evolving and without clearly defined successful outcomes yet while some less successful outcomes have also emerged);
- Unclear value and cost-benefit ratio of directly involving young people (especially in the form of advisory groups);
- Inability to see ways of fitting direct youth involvement into the institution's existing strategic approach to its work;
- Difficulties due to the (perceived) operational inflexibilities of current systems;
- Lack of resources (mostly work time but sometimes also budget e.g. to organise recruitment campaigns and involvement events);
- Discouraging experiences from prior attempts (e.g. having experienced the inability to recruit young people for or keep them active in the involvement process).

**These constraints were pointed out** both by the institutions which:

- have already started directly involving young people and now retrospectively analyse their previous mindset;
- haven't planned or started any involvement activities yet.



„We haven't really had this approach ever of working directly with young people. So we primarily work with other stakeholders. /-/ Of course, young people as such are the end users of the program and the most important beneficiaries. But we are not working directly with them. /-/ It's simply a matter of the resources that we have available. /-/ We have to find a way how to use the resources the most effectively. /-/ We don't have this kind of possibility or need at the moment to dwell more into / directly involving youth/."

„/-/ the NA /-/ is not directly communicating with young people. Of course, we have this European Network, where we involve and work with young people who have been participating in EU programs /-/. But overall, we have been working mainly with NGOs and municipalities."

„Previously, there have been, again, and again, discussions, on how to meaningfully and structurally involve young people. However, we had always come to the conclusion that it is very difficult to do youth involvement in a meaningful, sustainable way, especially since /-/ the regulations for how we work as the national agency are quite strictly regulated".

„We don't see much value in having random young people discussing these topics."



„I believe that if we are encouraging organizations to really practice youth participation, we should do it ourselves too.“



As **a good practice** to start moving towards direct involvement of youth, organising a workshop among the NA colleagues was suggested. The guiding questions to be discussed in the workshop can be developed along the following lines:

- What is the influence that we've already had on young people as an NA? What else would we like to achieve? How could involving young people directly help us to achieve this?
- What are the possibilities in our structure that allow for involving young people? Or – how we would like to involve young people and then how could we find ways to integrate the involvement method into our structure?

The institutions that *have* started to involve young people directly have been **driven by the following motivational factors:**

- **„Walking the talk“:** some NAs feel that all the NAs should lead by example regarding the appreciation of young people's contribution to society and thus their direct involvement. Besides aligning the NAs with the wider mission and goals of the EU youth policy, direct youth involvement would also support those NAs who are advocating for young people's involvement in society (e.g. by the municipalities) and provide respective training sessions;
- **Professional needs:** some institutions feel that they lack input to their strategic and operational plans from the final beneficiaries of the institution's work, i.e. the young. They see the direct involvement of young people as an essential act of ensuring the relevance and success of the institutions' work.

„/The creation of a youth involvement strategy, implementing NPiY SNAC and other initiatives has created/ a kind of like new dynamics so we have kind of reassessed the opportunities we would have /to involve the youth/. And then we have come to the conclusion that, yes, it would be possible to work towards more youth participation, but it can only really be meaningful and relevant if it's done in a very, very diligent way, and a very professional way, and a very sustainable way.“

# Categories of existing practices

When discussing the actual and potential ways to involve young people directly, the **following categories emerged**:

- Taking part in the development or supervision of strategies, action plans or other long-term processes;
- Participation as co-creators or being consulted in the design, implementation or assessment of activities;
- Counselling of potential applicants and selection process of applications;
- Other types of direct involvement.

„Participation as co-creators or being consulted in...“ is the category that may offer the widest possibilities for the institutions in terms of the goals and methods of direct involvement. If an institution would think creatively, **then almost any of its activities could be enriched by inviting young people to join in and contribute.**

„Selection process of applications...“ is considered potentially the least valuable type of involvement by the NAs. The best assessors have a deep understanding of the youth field and societal trends while being able to see „behind“ what has been written in the project application. Few young people would be able to meet such (wholly justified) professional criteria.

However, **youth may gain a more valuable position as assessors in case the project submission methods would be changed or diversified**, i.e. submission of a video application (instead of or in addition to) the written one. When assessing video applications, the young assessors could potentially have much more to contribute (e.g. by assessing the believability of the applicant’s motivation and plans).



„It's not really easy to bring young people up to the point where they can be highly qualified assessors of applications. /-/ The solidarity projects or youth participation projects are extremely difficult to apply for. /-/ If there was a more user-friendly way to apply for projects, for example, with a video application, or an interview or something like that /-/ I think that that would open up opportunities to involve young people also in the assessment of those applications.“

Regarding the following practices, **there were differing opinions among the NAs to which extent these can be considered as direct involvement:**

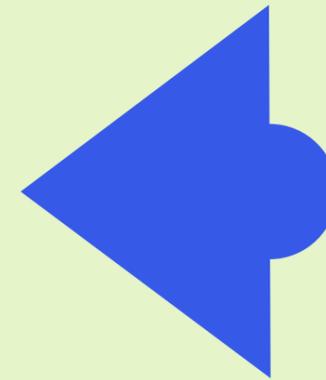
- Young trainers in the trainers' pool;
- Young assessors in the assessors' pool;
- Interns (as a part of formal education) in the NA;
- Young employees in the NA.

The suggestion of this report is **not to consider these practices as direct involvement of youth.** In all of the cases listed above, the main value of these roles emerges from *being qualified*: a qualified trainer, assessor, intern or employee.

Consciously hiring young trainers, assessors, interns and employees can be a worthwhile human resource management practice, especially in terms of diversifying the personnel (with all the benefits that increasing diversity can bring) and ensuring the existence of the workforce in the long term. However, being young in any of these roles is not an asset that should automatically be preferred over high qualifications and years of professional experience.



# Examples of current and past practices



The current and past practices of the NAs can be classified into the following categories.

**1. Involving youth representatives into Steering Groups and Boards** of the NAs to diversify the membership of those structures:

- a. In these cases, the involved individuals usually come from National Youth Councils or other youth associations, sometimes as formal representatives of these youth organisations;
- b. Involving participants from youth advocacy associations (and especially from youth councils) makes sense because having an interest in and experience with youth work and youth policy (and policymaking in general) may be necessary to contribute meaningfully as a member of a strategic structure. On the other hand, it is unclear how well the associations' representatives can advocate for the needs of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**2. Temporary Steering Groups** (regarding e.g. European Year of Youth, national youth involvement strategy) consisting only of young people:

- a. A good practice is establishing sub-groups (e.g. event planning, communication, spokespersons) of such groups, combining the NA's needs to achieve progress with the operational tasks with the interests and capabilities of the involved youth;
- b. Another good practice is about setting up a temporary advisory group to work out a plan with the NA regarding the establishment of a permanent youth involvement structure.



### 3. Permanent Youth Advisory Boards of the NA consisting only of young people:

- a. A good practice: regular frequent meetings (e.g. every 6 weeks), having each time a specific consultation issue (e.g. the challenges of a specific communication campaign) prepared by different departments of the NA.

### 4. Empowering and contracting local or interest-based youth associations (e.g. to look for new applicants for the Solidarity projects):

- a. A diverse set of youth associations has contacts with youth that the NAs or National Youth Councils would never reach or would never appear attractive to.

### 5. Involving Europeers as junior trainers at the events of the Europeers network:

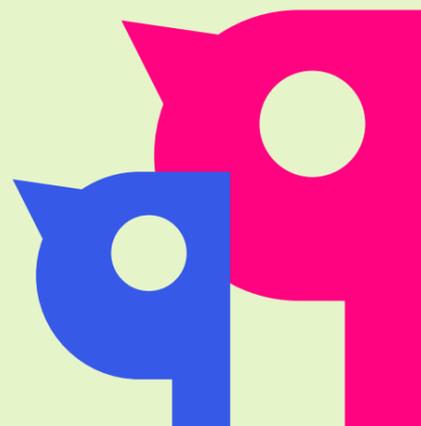
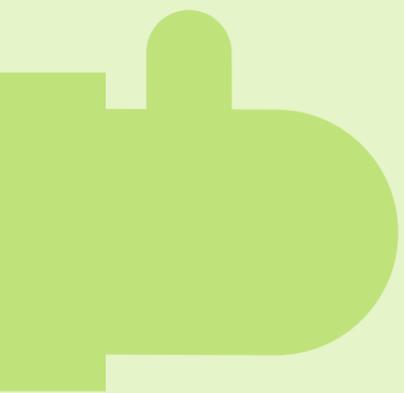
- a. Can be considered as direct involvement of youth if each year new youngsters are involved as trainers.



### 6. Involving interns with an explicit goal of utilising their background as a young person instead of doing tasks that a person of any age could do (can also be a regular activity: „permanent involvement of temporary interns“).

### 7. Past experience: regular focus groups of Youth In Action (2007-2013):

- a. Individual youth and organisations' representatives were involved separately;
- b. In addition to the information collection, youth and adults were brought together in a meaningful and fun way in informal settings;
- c. The strengths of focus groups compared with only having quantitative RAY surveys: more certainty that youth understand the questions properly, getting more actionable feedback.



# Lessons for the future

Based on the direct involvement experiences so far, it is suggested to consider the following questions before and during the direct involvement of youth by the NAs and SALTOs.

## 1. What are the conditions the institutions should create when involving young people? Some of the aspects to consider are:

- a. Relevant skills to motivate and empower young people and manage the process. It is a crucial precondition because all of the involvement cases of the NAs and SALTOs that haven't met their predefined goals have been unsuccessful mainly due to the way the involvement process and its content were designed and managed. It comes down to essential details of planning and managing all the steps, e.g. whether the youth understand what is expected from them, how group dynamics are managed from the very beginning and whether involvement meetings are facilitated professionally.
- b. Realistic ambitions and reasonable expectations (regarding e.g. goals for the process, level of diversity and inclusivity of the group, quantity and quality of young people's contribution);
- c. Sufficient clarity (regarding e.g. the mandate and duration of an advisory board in the institution's structure);
- d. Appropriate time frame (regarding e.g. how much time is allocated to recruit the youngsters and reach the results of the involvement process);
- e. Dedicated resources (regarding work time, and money).

„It's important to us not to disempower /the advisory group members/ and let their ideas just vanish. It's important that we highlight why we are deciding to take certain ideas forward, or why certain ideas are difficult to implement, and this kind of transparent approach. And then having all the stakeholders involved in the process, this has been the most time-consuming one to really make sure that we are not crossing anybody's boundaries. /-/ And at the same time, we enable youth to think as big and freely as they want. So to kind of juggle all these different elements, and then including the aspect of inclusion and low threshold, that has been the most difficult.“



## 2. How to make the topics and activities related to involvement understandable and attractive to youngsters?

- a. At the recruitment stage;
- b. At the implementation stage.

„It has been in a very sophisticated, complicated language that we have been /-/ setting this whole thing up. And this has been somewhat of exclusion criteria of certain young people with certain backgrounds.“

„I really hope that I can get the young people again to get together and go over the documents to see if they approve and if their input is actually there. And that is quite a challenge. And obviously, if you send some of them a 27-page material, and ask them to send in comments by next week, it almost never happens.“

„We have had one meeting /with the advisory group/. And basically /-/ they're commenting on the plans that we have already done.“

## 3. How to balance the needs for experience and diversity of the group?

It is among the most stimulating and complicated challenges that institutions face when recruiting young people to direct involvement activities. On the one hand, it is essential that young people from diverse (including disadvantaged) backgrounds can have a say regarding the strategies and activities aimed to involve young people. On the other hand, the ability to meaningfully contribute in the typical settings of direct youth involvement requires certain types of motivation, working styles and prior experiences from the participants.

„We have young people /in our group/ that are very active. We don't have young people that are coming from informal groups, or that are so-called disengaged young people. It's a gap. It's a blind spot of the /-/ group. But it's something that, yeah, we couldn't get the way around it.“

„But there definitely should have been more diversity /-/ But then again, that could have also made the whole process even more confusing. If there will be somebody who doesn't know anything about the youth sector at all, then it would be hard for him to work with the other more experienced young people.“

#### 4. How to overcome the busyness of active youth, especially when involving them as a group?

Somewhat ironically:

- it may be challenging for the institutions to recruit less experienced youth (from disadvantaged backgrounds) to the involvement processes,
- thus participants with prior youth work and activism experiences are usually chosen,
- and then turns out that it is difficult to keep these types of young people actively engaged because of their other commitments (e.g. formal education, NGO work, international projects).

„Not all of them could make it to the first meeting. So of course, that's going to be one of the challenges because as we tried to handpick people that already have some skills in these kinds of working groups, they usually are also young people that have a lot going on. So it means that they will be very busy.“

„And obviously we fed them and it was a nice company, etc. But /-/ there was nothing they could lose if they just say no, I'm not coming to the meeting /-/. So if there is there will be maybe something at stake for them, then there will not be so many cancellations. /-/ Maybe if we would have taken the approach of taking young people who are not the heads of their organizations already, maybe they would have more time to contribute/-/“.

#### 5. How to keep the experiences of involving young people as institutional knowledge in the NAs?

- a. In the case of temporary employees managing special projects involving youth;
- b. In case of permanent staff turnover.

„How this learning that we learn in this group will then stay in the house? Because the year will finish and my contract will finish and you know, like everything /will finish/. So how could we maybe hand it over somehow? So this /type of direct youth involvement by us/ is the first. Because this is so new, we haven't discussed /the handover/.“

#### 6. How to consult young people regarding the work of NAs meaningfully on the European level?

Some institutions pointed out that it is more difficult to involve young people satisfactorily in European-level processes (compared with national ones).

„The likelihood of /-/ a tangible result to be achieved by the youth consultation is quite low, or the progress is quite slow, and maybe only small changes would be effected. /-/ So we don't want to lead to a frustrating experience for the young people.“

## Annexes

# Annex 1. The research process

The qualitative research process consisted of twelve interviews and two observations. Self-selection was used when recruiting the participants as the interview invitation was repeatedly shared with relevant representatives of the NAs and SALTOs.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out via Zoom in English. The interview questionnaire is presented in Annex 2.

The interviews took place in April-October, 2022. The interviewees were from the following NAs and SALTOs: Belgium – Flandres, Cyprus, Estonia (2 separate interviews), Finland (3 interviewees), Germany, Latvia (2 interviewees), the Netherlands, SALTO PI, SALTO SEE, SALTO TC, Slovenia.

The observations took place during the two virtual meetings of the Co-Steering Group of the Youth Participation Strategy in February and June 2022.



## Annexes

# Annex 2. Interview questionnaire

The topics of the half-structured interview are presented below.

**1.** What sparked your attention when you received our invitation to join the interview?

**2.** What is your current role at the National Agency or SALTO?

**3.** A few questions about the context regarding your National Agency or SALTO.

**3.1** How is it legally organised? What is its mandate?

**3.2** Does it have any country-specific aims and activities that the other NAs or SALTOs typically don't have? If yes, then what are these?

**4.** What has been your Agency's or SALTO's current experience regarding involving youth in any of your activities?

**4.1** If there has been any involvement of youth in the NA's or SALTO's activities, we'll cover the following questions regarding each of these activities:

- How did the idea/initiative to involve youth in this activity start?
- What was the aim of the involvement? How was it arranged in practice?

- What would you consider as the successes of the involvement? Why? What would you consider as improvement areas of the involvement experience? Why?

- What were the factors that influenced the process and the outcomes?

- What has been the longer-term influence or the follow-up of the involvement activity? E.g. is it something that takes place regularly?

**4.2** If there has been no involvement or very limited involvement of youth in the NA's or SALTO's activities so far, we'll cover the following questions:

- What have been the discussions regarding youth involvement in your NA or SALTO? What have been the conclusions so far?

- What do you see as the value of youth involvement in the NA's or SALTO's activities in general?

- Which would be the activities where the value would be the greatest?

- What are the current constraints of involving young people in these activities?

- How could these constraints be overcome?

**5.** Let's have a look at a predetermined list of the activities that the NAs or SALTOs could possibly involve youth in. The list will be copied to the Zoom chat window. We'll discuss only the items that haven't been covered in your previous answers.

**5.1** In the context of your national NA or SALTO, which of these activity types would be the most relevant for youth involvement? Why? How to enable involvement in the future?

**5.2** In the context of your national NA or SALTO, which of these activity types would be the least relevant for youth involvement? Why? Under which conditions these activities could become relevant for involving the youth?

**6.** What will be your NA's or SALTO's next steps regarding youth involvement in your activities? What would be the support that you would need to increase the likelihood of success?

**7.** What are the related topics that we didn't discuss but that you would like to add?

## Annexes

# Annex 3. Selected notable practices

All the interviewees had valuable ideas and experiences to share. Most of the institutions have at least one method of directly involving young people, most frequently by recruiting a few representatives of youth organisations as members of various types of strategic level boards and project evaluation committees.

Some cases that may be especially useful to introduce and discuss on the European level have been described below. As all of the institutions are still in the process of trying out the approaches (and usually the outcome was unclear at the time of interviewing), these ongoing experiences have been named „notable examples“ rather than „good practices“.

Institution	Notables examples of youth involvement	Useful lessons for others regarding the notable practice
National Agency, Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a permanent Youth Advisory Board to consult the centre of youth programmes. The Board members can be involved by different designated members of the NA staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring gender, age and linguistic diversity even in the case of a small group</li> <li>Choosing the topics that interest the group members the most (in this case: Erasmus+ program design, communication, youth trainings)</li> <li>Need to pay more attention to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- involving younger age groups too</li> <li>- keeping the group regularly involved with at least one colleague</li> <li>- building up the group dynamics</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
National Agency, Finland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a temporary Youth Steering Group regarding national activities of the European Year of Youth (in parallel to the Steering Group consisting of adult members)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Due to a tight time frame, there was a need to handpick the members from youth organisations (while ensuring the diversity of the group, e.g. by involving more than one person with an immigration background)</li> <li>Structuring the group into sub-groups according to the needs of the NA and the interests of youth (in this case: event planning, communication strategy, spokespersons, also help with social media)</li> </ul>

National Agency, Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a temporary Youth Advisory Board to consult the creation of a permanent Youth Advisory Board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organising a recruitment process using a diverse set of channels and stakeholders to reach out to relevant participants of the group</li> <li>Involving academic competence (from a university) about how to set up consultation structures with public bodies (while planning better at which stages of the process and how the academicians' input would be used)</li> <li>More attention needed to be paid to avoid: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the creation of a very tight schedule regarding the involvement project</li> <li>complicated and sophisticated language when recruiting for and setting up the group</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
National Agency, Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing an Advisory Council for the Youth Participation Strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More attention to helping the group members to understand the context of the NA, and dealing with the busy schedule of the members who – as active youth – have accepted also other extracurricular commitments</li> </ul>
National Agency, the Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a permanent advisory group (recruited from the Europeers representatives) that meets every 6 weeks and gives feedback about current topics (e.g. content of planned communication campaigns)</li> <li>The Youth Panel of the Dutch Youth Institute. Its members also give practical, mostly communication-related advice (once a month for 4 hours)</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Permanent advisory group:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The possibility to give feedback about specific topics keeps the youth focused and motivated</li> <li>Different departments of the NA can propose topics while the communication department is the most active one, asking for feedback on communication materials, campaign concepts etc</li> <li>While forming the group on an ad hoc basis by involving the interested Europeers, there is no clear plan for how to keep the group renewed</li> </ul> <p><b><u>The Youth Panel:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Part of its success relies upon coaching the young participants to fulfil their roles effectively</li> </ul>
National Agency, Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regularly involving the European Solidarity Corps volunteers in proposing the topics for the training programme and even giving some trainings themselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As a result of regularly involving volunteers in designing the training programme, they feel ownership and participate actively in the co-designed trainings</li> </ul>
SALTO PI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a Co-Steering Group for the Youth Participation Strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The participants received financial compensation for their involvement</li> <li>Paying more attention to personal follow-ups with the participants between the group meetings</li> </ul>

The work on youth involvement in the work and decision-making of National Agencies is ongoing.

This mapping was conducted in April-November 2022, as part of the **“New Power in Youth” Strategic Partnership between National Agencies and several SALTO Resource Centers**. It contributes to one of its aims “Supporting the strategic development of youth participation in democratic life on local, national and European level”. It also aligns with Aim 5 of the **Youth Participation Strategy** – to encourage National Agencies and other actors to involve young people when making decisions about the management and implementation in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes, and to take a quality approach to youth participation when doing so.

Author: Jaan Aps

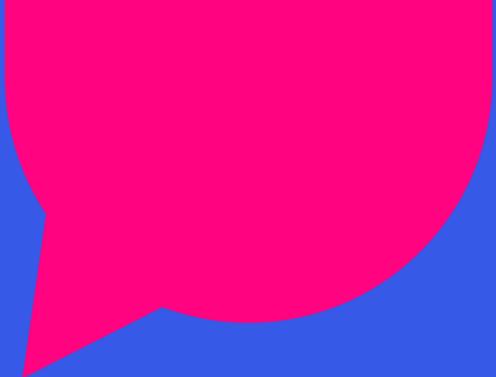
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