Navigating Democratic Participation:
State of Play in Erasmus+ National Agencies for Education & Training

Summary Report

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Introduction & Background

Research Overview and Objectives

This report summarises the findings from research on the needs, challenges and practices of Erasmus+ National Agencies (NAs) in the field of Education & Training (E&T) on the topic of Participation in Democratic Life in the Erasmus+ Programme.

The research was coordinated by SALTO Participation & Information (SALTO PI) with the aim of informing its future actions for the E&T sectors. It was commissioned by People Dialogue and Change and carried out between July and December 2023 and aimed to address:

1. **Understanding:** Assess how NAs interpret and integrate the participation priority, including the focus areas of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and digital participation.
2. **Relevance:** Evaluate the perceived importance of the participation priority across different Erasmus+ subsectors and actions.
3. **Practices:** Identify existing practices and strategies employed by NAs to promote participation.
4. **Needs and Opportunities:** Highlight challenges faced by NAs and propose tailored support mechanisms for addressing these challenges.

Using surveys and focus groups with 92% NA participation, the research offers insights into participation activities' current state. These findings have informed SALTO PI's work and its support of NAs in enhancing civic engagement and democratic participation across Europe.

The research report also includes practical examples and ideas to support NAs in strengthening their efforts to promote the participation priority across the Erasmus+ Programme.

In the research, *participation in democratic life* was defined as entailing any *endeavour (in-person or virtual) where citizens actively take part and influence political and civic life by expressing their voices or seeking a positive social change through volunteering, advocacy, and activism*.
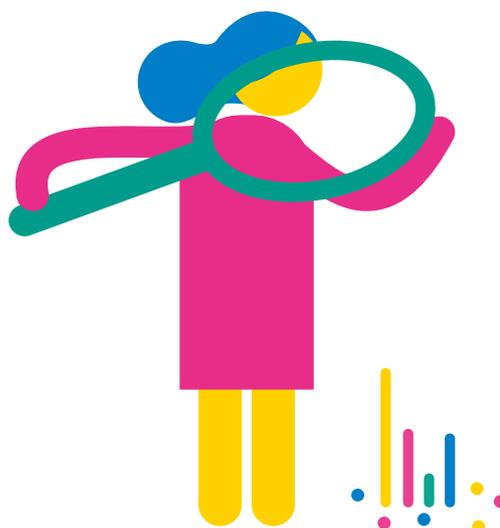
The survey and focus group invites were sent to the

41 E&T National Agencies

36 out of **39** NAs

answered the survey, which represents

92% participation

23 participants from

19 NAs took part in focus groups

All of the

33 countries of the Erasmus+ Programme are represented

Access the FULL REPORT with collated NA practices and inspiration HERE.

About the "Participation in Democratic Life" priority

The participation of individuals in democratic life, civic engagement, and the promotion of common values lies at the heart of the European Union's vision for a cohesive and inclusive society. Within the Erasmus+ Programme, it is a horizontal priority that addresses the barriers to active citizenship and aims to foster a sense of belonging across diverse communities. By equipping individuals with skills and opportunities to engage in democratic processes, the "participation priority" contributes to promoting unity, diversity, and shared values.

About SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI)

SALTO PI's mission is to support the stakeholders of the Erasmus+ (E+) and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) in using these programmes to promote meaningful democratic participation guided by common values. Through its efforts, SALTO PI aims to ensure the programmes contribute to a Europe where everyone has the right, means, space, opportunity, and support to be active in democratic life and influence decision-making.

Research results

Relevance and Coordination of the Participation Priority

Importance of the participation priority

NAs place high importance on the participation priority, recognising its alignment with Erasmus+ goals and EU values. The survey results show 81% of respondents consider it very or extremely important for the programme, and 80% for their agency's work. Some respondents stressed that the participation priority did not gain as much

81% of respondents identified participation as either very important or extremely important to the Erasmus+ Programme

emphasis within the NA as other horizontal priorities, and that it was also seen as less important than other priorities by the E&T sector.

Participation priority importance perceptions per sector:

Higher Education: 6%, 26%, 26%, 43%, 26%

Vocational Education: 14%, 14%, 3%, 20%, 49%

School Education: 3%, 28%, 56%, 14%

Adult Education: 11%, 9%, 29%, 51%

Legend:
- Extremely important
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not so important
- Not at all important
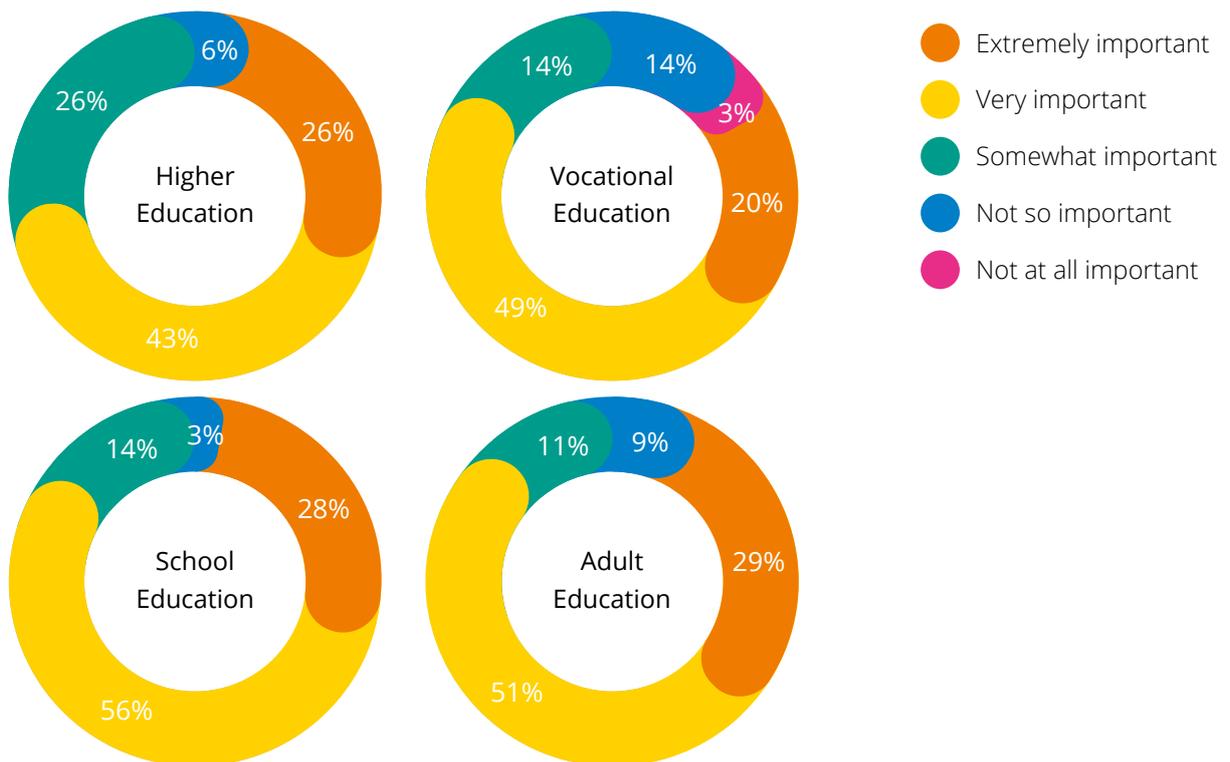
Main research conclusions on the understanding and perspectives of the priority:

- Many NAs connect the priority to the foundational values of the European Union, highlighting its significance in fostering democratic participation and EU identity.
- This suggests a very broad understanding of the priority amongst NAs. It was also stated that the priority was more often associated with the Youth sector than E&T.
- Lack of dedicated officers and specific funding incentives has led to reduced emphasis compared to other priorities. This limits promotion and awareness efforts within NAs and their beneficiaries.
- School and Adult Education integrate the priority through civic engagement, while Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education more indirectly link to priority topics through mobility and extracurricular activities.
- NAs associate the priority with citizenship, democratic participation, and EU values. Emerging themes include combating democratic backsliding, promoting inclusion, and addressing information literacy and climate activism.
- NAs lack confidence in their understanding of both the participation priority itself and what the priority means in practice, struggling to convey it to beneficiaries and translate it into concrete actions.

Coordination of Participation Activities in NAs

Coordination mechanisms for the participation priority vary significantly across NAs, with only 39% having a lead individual responsible for the priority. At the time of the research, few agencies had a dedicated department or officer, and many combined participation responsibilities with other roles, such as inclusion or digitalisation.

Key findings include:

- **Management Structures:** While some NAs have identified participation leaders or departments, 39% lack formal arrangements. Collaborative work with youth NAs occurs in some cases but is inconsistent.

"The priority comprises many different aspects like media literacy, active citizenship, common values, cultural heritage, etc. – which makes it somewhat fuzzy… as an NA, we are not experts in the field, we can only gather and disseminate relevant material and showcase examples of good practice."

Research participant

- **Role of NAs:** Most agencies act as facilitators, promoting the priority to potential beneficiaries and providing support through tools, training, and networks. Few NAs adopt a more proactive or strategic role.
- **Call for Consistency:** Focus group participants suggest the need for standardising roles, such as establishing dedicated 'Participation Officers', to ensure equitable emphasis on the priority across NAs.

Practices and Measures

The NAs demonstrated a broad range of approaches to addressing the participation priority, although the research still revealed uncertainty about specific actions for the 2024–2027 programme period. Planned approaches indicated by NAs include:

- Themed events and information campaigns targeting wider and more diverse groups;
- Development of programme ambassadors to support beneficiaries and promote the participation priority;
- Sharing good practice examples from relevant projects;
- Consideration of creating a Training and Cooperation Activity (TCA) or Long-term Activity (LTA) linked to the European Parliament Elections;
- Development of a dedicated participation strategy;
- Creation of website pages to highlight European initiatives aimed at enhancing democratic participation;
- Award of additional points in application assessments.

TCAs and LTAs are capacity-building mechanisms open to NAs through which they collaborate together to allocate dedicated funding to address programme, priority or participant needs. They often result in tailored thematic training, contact-making seminars, research or other initiatives delivered nationally, internationally or online. LTAs reflect longer-term cooperation agreements between NAs, often involving multiple actions and TCAs over several years.

Types of practices used to promote the participation priority:

50% Involvement in TCAs / LTAs

36% Communication and information activities for beneficiaries

42% National or local events and initiatives for beneficiaries

17% Assessment measures

17% Other

The approaches mentioned by NAs were largely general, rather than specific, with most NAs integrating participation promotion and support into general communication and activities rather than delivering dedicated initiatives. The use of TCAs and LTAs was the most commonly identified practice which concretely targeted the priority although one NA stood out with a dedicated civic education strategy.

Insights Into NA Activities Related to Participation

NAs' views on the quality of their participation activities vary. While 69% of participants rated their work in the area of participation above 5 out of 10, the lowest response was 3 and the highest response was 10. Focus group discussions revealed that many NAs aim to place more emphasis on participation, but lack a common approach or understanding of how best to do that.

"[A success factor is] … designing interactive formats that encourage collaboration, dialogue, and exchange of ideas among participants enhance the overall engagement and generate richer outcomes … Empowering participants to actively contribute, share ideas, and take ownership of the activity fosters a sense of ownership and investment in its success."

Survey respondent

Success factors to achieve it are generally centred around:

- Raising awareness among beneficiaries, partners, and potential applicants;
- Engaging new stakeholders and encouraging applications of projects related to participation;
- Sharing the programme's potential to foster democratic participation.

NAs assess the success of their activities by measuring outcomes such as the number of new participants, media coverage, and the number of projects submitted under the participation priority.

Key Approaches

To achieve the desired outcomes for participation, NAs employ several key methods:

- **Targeted Communication:** Ensuring communication is tailored to reach the right groups and foster active engagement during events, encouraging diverse participation.
- **Best Practice Sharing and Peer Learning:** Showcasing successful Erasmus+ projects through case studies, role-modelling, and collaborative learning environments.
- **Use of Participatory Methods:** Designing interactive events to build ownership and encourage active contribution from participants, involving experts, researchers, and real-life examples.
- **Innovative Formats:** Designing events that promote dialogue, collaboration, and idea exchange, empowering participants to take ownership of their activities.

Survey respondents highlighted that the most successful initiatives are those that focus on selecting and preparing the target group carefully, ensuring equal opportunities for participation, and integrating innovative tools like digital democracy platforms.

Participation Focus Topics

Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

MIL refers to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, competences, and practices that allow an individual to effectively access, analyse, critically evaluate, interpret, use, create, and disseminate information and media products on a creative, legal, and ethical basis.

According to the research results, MIL is considered to be of less importance to the work of NAs than the participation priority as a whole. However, just over half of the NAs still identify educational and training activities about MIL as either important, very important, or extremely important to their work.

NAs consider projects or activities focusing on MIL address the participation priority by default, as it is a prerequisite for an individual to engage in democratic participation. Two-thirds of NAs linked MIL directly to the participation priority in their work, with a focus on supporting the E&T sector to develop learner competences in this area.
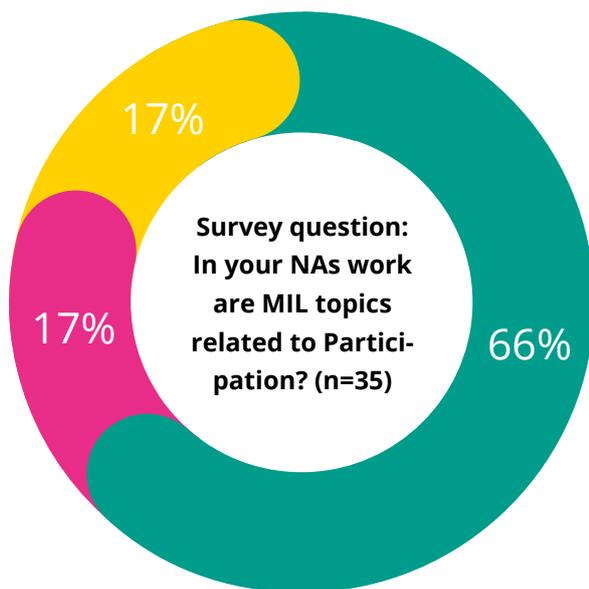
> "Digitalisation is the priority. That is very often chosen, yes, by our beneficiaries, but not in the connection with participation, unfortunately."
>
> *Focus group participant*

Digital Participation

Digital participation (sometimes called e-participation) is a form of democratic participation that takes place online. Digital participation involves the use of information and communication technology, social media and other digital tools to enable citizens to influence and engage with political and civic life.

The research identified that NAs currently confuse the concept of digital participation with the development of digital skills, digital transformation, or digitalisation. The latter refers to the use of digital tools and platforms and the ongoing integration of digital technologies and digitised data across the economy and society.

Focus groups highlighted how digitalisation was incorporated into their work rather than digital participation as a tool to engage in political and civic life. In one of the focus groups there was a recognition that digitalisation could be broadened out to include digital participation, but that education and training beneficiaries don't do this.

Whilst the two topics of digitalisation and digital participation are closely related, there may be a need to better promote understanding of digital participation amongst NAs and within the E&T sector.

Survey question: In your NAs work are MIL topics related to Participation? (n=35)

17% 17% 66%

● Yes ● No ● Don't know

Challenges in Addressing Participation in the Erasmus+ Programme

The NAs reported several interrelated challenges when addressing the participation priority in the Erasmus+ Programme. These challenges were grouped into four main areas:

- **Capacity and Confidence:** Many NAs express they lack dedicated leads for the participation priority, resulting in inconsistencies in promotion and delivery. Existing leads often feel under-resourced, overwhelmed by expectations, and unsure of how to balance progress on the priority with existing responsibilities.
- **Scope and Complexity:** The participation priority is perceived as too broad and difficult to translate into actionable steps for beneficiaries. Misunderstandings, such as equating participation solely with political activism without considering the many other forms of participation, further complicate engagement.
- **Balance Against Other Priorities:** NAs consider more tangible horizontal priorities like inclusion and the green transition often take precedence over participation, which is viewed as harder to both understand and implement in projects.
- **Political Associations and Impact Measurement:** Participation is sometimes seen as politically charged, discouraging its uptake. Additionally, measuring the impact of NAs' activities or projects on civic skills and behaviours presents significant challenges.

These issues highlight the need for greater clarity, capacity-building, and practical tools to support both NAs and beneficiaries. Despite these barriers, NAs recognise the importance of participation and emphasise the need for tailored resources, clearer definitions, and collaborative efforts to address the challenges effectively.

"We need a definition and concrete examples of what this theme represents within a project."

Research participant

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"This topic is not welcome in some schools as it is connected to politics ... some professors are afraid of this."

Focus group participant

Resources and Support Requested

The mapped NA needs reflected common themes, particularly in terms of resources, tools, and approaches to better engage beneficiaries.

Survey and focus group responses identified several key resource formats for supporting NAs, including:

- **Awareness-raising** tools to support project beneficiaries throughout the project cycle (but also targeting sectors individually).
- **Training and capacity building**, with a focus on using Key Action 2 (KA2) and Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA) to promote it.
- **Best practice dissemination** through success stories and ethical case studies.
- **Targeted outreach** for specific groups such as early-years learners and those questioning democratic values.

91%

of NAs in the survey indicated they would find the development of events and resources linking the Youth sector with the Education and Training sector useful.

NAs indicated they would like to have access to various resources linked to the participation priority, especially:

- A conceptual framework for democratic participation which breaks down and explains the various sub-topics within it.
- A network of 'participation officers' or 'participation leads' amongst NAs to create synergies, inter-agency learning, sharing of practice and materials, providing support and stimulus.
- Resources and initiatives around European values linked to the European Elections.
- Projects and resources that stimulate peer-to-peer learning within the E&T sector on the participation priority
- A range of practical resources and tools for beneficiaries, such as:
  - Curriculum integration guides for each sector;
  - Policy briefs and research summaries for each sector;
  - E-learning modules for beneficiaries;
  - Experiential learning toolkits for educators.

Additionally, respondents highlighted a need for **improved communication on the participation priority**, with suggestions for a strategic approach across sectors. Specifically, there was a call to **raise awareness of the participation priority among E&T stakeholders**, including NAs.

A stronger strategic approach, integrated across the programmes and sub-sectors, was suggested, to **empower NA staff and better support beneficiaries in recognising the importance of this priority**.

Survey participants also indicated that developing a **shared participation strategy across the E&T and Youth sectors** could enhance the programme's overall effectiveness. 32 out of 33 NAs expressed interest in collaboration with the Youth sector, noting that materials and practices from the sector could be adapted for E&T.

"You said… we did" – SALTO PI Actions and Next Steps

To address the challenges and needs raised during this research, which were also pointed out at other consultative instances (including with the Youth sector), SALTO Participation has already taken forward several actions in 2024:

- Established the NA Participation Network, formed by Contact Points from all NAs, to foster peer-to-peer learning and provide further training and collaboration opportunities;
- Fostered cross-sector collaboration, encouraging networking across officers, joint projects, and alignment among stakeholders (a particular example was the 2024 Participation Forum);
- Contributed and participated in new TCAs and the active LTAs dedicated to participation;

- Produced and distributed information and resources on the European Elections and co-organised a TCA on the topic;
- Developed new resources such as articles breaking down the participation priority in the different sectors and different aspects of it, new case studies on promoting participation in formal and non-formal education through Erasmus+ and ESC, and gamification available on **https://participationpool.eu/**;
- Conducted a user and expert resource review of its centralised resource platform to ensure its suitability for E&T;
- Promoted efforts to increase the visibility and understanding of the participation priority among NAs, beneficiaries, and Commission colleagues.

Next Steps

Additionally, SALTO Participation plans the following next steps and actions:

- Cross-sector collaboration: Encourage cross-sector learning between the Education & Training and Youth sectors to share practices and materials through events and initiatives.
- Training: Continue to build NA capacity by offering targeted training and tailored support for staff.
- Impact measurement: Invest in tools to measure participation outcomes and use technology for monitoring and sharing success stories.
- New tools: Develop and/or disseminate resources such as case studies, training and communication materials, accessible guides, e-learning tools, and experiential resources for all sectors;
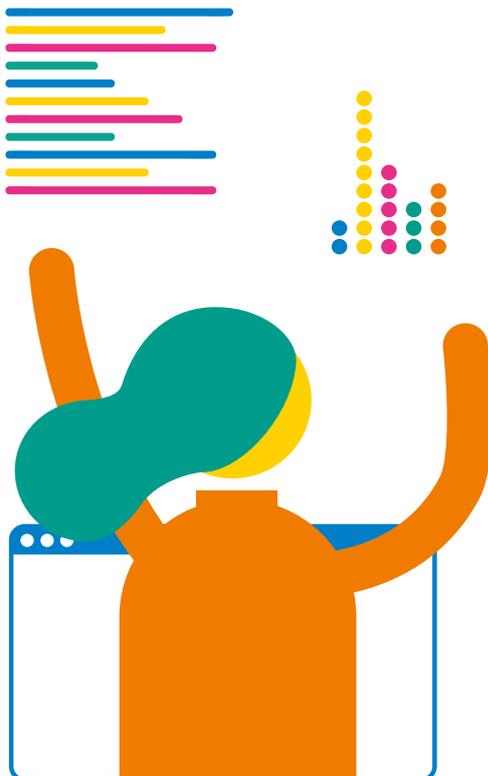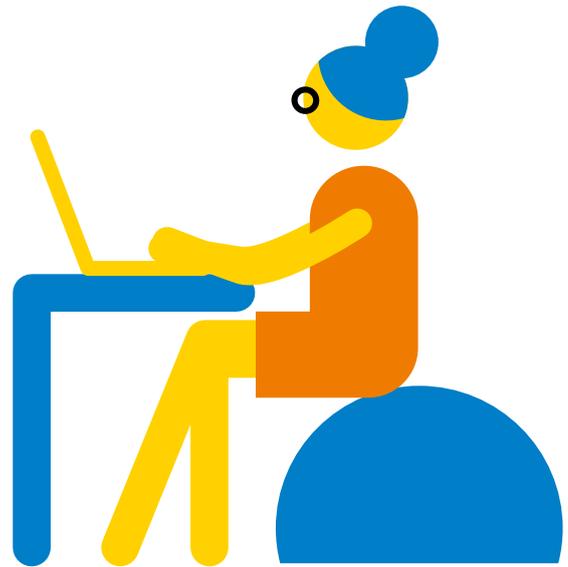
- Clarity and communication: Simplify and break down the participation priority into concrete sub-topics that can be understood and communicated by both the NA and programme actors;
- Sharing practices: expanding the type and formats of practices shared, including examples from NAs;
- Outreach to the fields: deepen the knowledge of the fields and their needs on the topics as well as key partners, to improve the quality of support provided;
- Explore synergies among priorities: understand the connections between Participation and Digital Transformation, Inclusion & Diversity and Green, to better support its implementation, particularly on shared topics (e.g. digital participation).

Inspiration and Opportunities for NAs

Over the course of the research, NAs shared many practices that offer opportunities to address challenges and advance the work on the participation priority. Additional approaches, links, and information were also separately identified to highlight opportunities for NAs to address challenges and advance their work on the participation priority. Here is a selection of these.

Building NA Capacity and Commitment for Participation

To ensure effective engagement with the participation priority, NAs have started approaches that build both their internal capacity and their commitment to this key area. These focus on creating strong foundations and establishing dedicated roles to drive action.

- **Vision for Impact:** Some NAs have developed national participation strategies and action plans that provide a clear direction and measurable goals. These plans ensure that participation remains a focus in the long term and are underpinned by a commitment to civic engagement, skill development, and European identity.
- **Dedicated Roles:** Establishing roles like the Participation Officer has proven essential in ensuring focused, knowledgeable support for participation goals. This role is supported by tailored training and guidance, drawing from lessons learned in other priority officer

networks, ensuring that these officers are well-equipped to meet the challenges ahead.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** NAs have found success in building cross-sector teams that include experts from education, inclusion, civic education, and ICT, among others. This collaboration ensures that the participation agenda is integrated across all sectors and that the diverse needs of different groups are addressed.

Spotlight on National Strategies

The Czech NA's (CZ01) Participation Action Plan integrates civic engagement, skill development, and European identity, with clear metrics to track progress. Initiatives include webinars, consultations, and professional support, focusing on building media literacy and digital skills.

France's (FR01) Civic Education and Engagement Strategy promotes active citizenship and the Erasmus+ contribution to participation. The strategy includes surveys, ambassador networks, and annual events, all aimed at raising awareness and fostering engagement with the participation priority.

Beneficiary Engagement Strategies

Engaging beneficiaries effectively is key to ensuring that participation becomes a central focus in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps projects. NAs employ various strategies to demystify the participation priority, inspire action, and help beneficiaries understand its potential impact.

- **Raising Awareness and Inspiring Action:** National events, webinars, and online discussions are regularly organised to clarify the participation priority. These activities provide essential context and demonstrate the practical impact of participation-focused projects. Dedicated website sections are also frequently used to showcase examples and offer resources.

- **Cross-Sector Partnerships:** NAs collaborate with civil society organisations, youth groups, and community leaders to enhance outreach and engage diverse beneficiary groups, ensuring that participation opportunities reach underrepresented communities.

- **Awards and Recognition:** Awards like dedicated categories in the "Golden Apple" award in Estonia and the "Fundamental Academic Values Award" in Germany serve as platforms to recognise outstanding contributions to participation. These awards encourage further action by celebrating the positive outcomes of participation-focused projects.

These strategies emphasise the importance of awareness-raising, recognition, and the use of alumni networks in motivating beneficiaries to engage with the participation priority.

Role Models and Alumni Networks:

Highlighting the work of individuals and groups who have made meaningful contributions to democratic participation serves as a powerful motivator for beneficiaries. They might be national or transnational, including joining a range of TCA and LTA initiatives already running on the topic.

There are several examples of national Role Model and Alumni networks that provide platforms for past participants to share their experiences and inspire others. In addition, NAs have created international partnerships and networks on the topic, such as PEACE, EuroPeers, and EuroApprentices, to promote transnational connections and quality training for some groups.

PEACE (Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement): Engages alumni across sectors through seminars and e-modules, offering insights into European democracy and encouraging active citizenship.

EuroPeers and EuroApprentices: These peer-to-peer networks empower young people to share their Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps' experiences, organising events, workshops, and media outreach to encourage others to participate.

Building Beneficiary Capacity

Building the capacity of beneficiaries to engage with the participation priority is essential for ensuring that projects are impactful and aligned with the broader goals of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. NAs support beneficiaries by providing tailored training, resources, and mentorship opportunities.

- **Practical Tools and Examples:** NAs curate collections of good practices and project examples that showcase successful participation initiatives. These collections serve as valuable resources for beneficiaries to draw from when designing their own projects. The Erasmus+ Project Results Platform (EPRP) also provides a searchable database of projects that align with participation goals.

- **Participation Pool Resources:** The SALTO PI Participation Pool is an evolving collection of best practices, training materials, and practical tools supporting participation in democratic life, media literacy, and digital engagement. Originally developed for the Youth sector, it **now includes transferable resources relevant to a wider range of beneficiaries**. Examples include digital citizenship projects from European Schoolnet, strategies for youth involvement in NA decision-making, and lesson plans that foster online participation.

- **Support for Specific Topics:** For example, this French NA portfolio of Erasmus+ projects addresses themes such as combating discrimination and promoting democratic values. These collections offer practical examples and insights into how participation can be integrated into various sectors and contexts.

- **Mentorship and Peer Learning:** Some NAs provide training workshops, mentoring, and peer-to-peer exchanges to ensure that beneficiaries have the skills and knowledge to implement impactful participation projects. This

also includes facilitating access to centralised knowledge hubs where beneficiaries can share experiences and learn from one another.

The strategies shared by NAs demonstrate a strong commitment to advancing the participation priority across Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, driving engagement and collaboration.

Shaping the Future of Participation in Erasmus+

The research findings, recommendations, and inspiring examples presented here highlight both the challenges and the opportunities in advancing the participation priority across the Erasmus+ Education & Training sector.

While structural and capacity limitations persist, there is a clear and shared ambition among National Agencies to embed participation more deeply within the programme.

SALTO PI stands ready to support this journey, providing NAs with the tools, networks, and guidance needed to translate ambition into action.

By working together, sharing insights, and embracing new possibilities, NAs and SALTO PI can make meaningful participation a lasting and transformative force across Erasmus+, helping to build a more inclusive and engaged society.

Access the FULL REPORT with collected NA practices and inspiration HERE.