



The experience of host organisations in the European Solidarity Corps Programme: fostering integration and empowering participants

The European Solidarity Corps (hereafter ESC) programme offers young people the opportunity to participate in meaningful projects and contribute to the development of different communities across Europe. The success of the ESC programme is based on the dedication and support provided by the host organisations.

In this article we summarise the responses from interviews with several Spanish host organisations and analyse, among other questions, how they facilitate the integration of participants in the ESC, the types of projects they are involved in, the results achieved, existing support mechanisms, opportunities for competence development, promotion of intercultural exchange, challenges faced, long-term benefits, measurement of impact as well as specific requirements to be eligible for traineeships. Since most of the answers were the same, it was decided to summarise the responses and the results of the interview are presented question by question below.

1. *How does your host organisation support and facilitate the integration of European Solidarity Corps participants into the local community?*

Host organisations play a key role in supporting the integration of ESC participants into the local community.

"We have an integration week planned in which volunteers get to know the programmes and spaces. Afterwards, they are given information about youth services, offered resources and encouraged to participate". (Hugo D. – Volunteers Tutor at Casa Aleste, Valladolid)

In addition, the volunteers are involved in the daily life of the locality by presenting the project on social networks and also by contacting the media to give it more visibility. In addition, the volunteers often participate in the activities developed by the municipality and collaborate with various associations, in order to ensure their integration from the very beginning.

Through various initiatives, participants are encouraged to interact with members of the community, learn the local language and become familiar with the culture.

"Orientation sessions, local community events and networking opportunities offered by host organisations help participants to establish links and build meaningful relationships". (Sonia C. - Volunteer Tutor at Asociación Deses 3, Medina del Campo).



2. What kind of projects or activities are European Solidarity Corps participants usually involved in when working with your organisation?

ESC participants are involved in a wide range of projects and activities, depending on the objective of the host organisation.

Sonia C., explains that the Deses-3 Association not only provides volunteers for tasks necessary for the organisation itself, but also spends one day a week at the Scooby animal shelter, supports an association of people with intellectual disabilities and participates in activities organised by the local development service of the municipality.

In the case of Hugo D., however, the volunteers are involved in socio-educational activities with children and young people, but also with adults. In many cases they work with groups at risk of social exclusion.

Manuel, tutor of the volunteers at Omix, Ribadavia, explains the different initiatives and activities, often related to leisure time, aimed at stimulating their creativity, developing different skills and sharing information. In addition, volunteers have the opportunity to participate in international events to become active European citizens. *"Our aim is to give all young people in our municipality the opportunity to increase their self-awareness, to use and develop their skills and to actively participate in building a united Europe, in order to create an informal platform for cooperation on a European scale."*

3. Can you give examples of successful results or achievements of previous European Solidarity Corps projects or volunteers who have worked with your organisation?

All the organisations interviewed were proud of the positive results of the ESC projects and volunteers. The response was unequivocal in stating that at least 70-80% of volunteers get a job at the end of their experience, very often related to non-formal education and in some cases linked to the development of Erasmus+ projects.

In some cases, the volunteers were hired directly by the entities in which they were volunteering. *"Moreover, their success is transversal, as their action contributes to the objectives of the organisation: education in values"*, says Hugo D.

4. How do you ensure that European Solidarity Corps participants receive adequate support and guidance during their stay in your organisation?

Ensuring the well-being and success of programme participants is a priority for the host organisations. Appropriate support and guidance are provided throughout the duration of the volunteering placement. Organisations assign mentors or supervisors who provide continuous support, guidance



and feedback. Regular check-ups (2 or 3 times a week) and evaluation sessions, as well as open and constant communication channels, allow participants to address any problems or difficulties they may encounter during the placement. In addition, the National Agency organises training courses on arrival and mid-term, which volunteers are required to attend.

5. Are there opportunities for European Solidarity Corps participants to develop specific competencies or gain professional experience through their participation in your organisation?

ESC internships offer participants valuable opportunities to develop specific competences and gain professional experience. In planning the activities, the focus is on developing competences related to their personal interests.

Host organisations develop projects that enable participants to acquire transferable skills such as teamwork, leadership, project management and intercultural communication. Workshops, training sessions and collaboration with local professionals enhance participants' personal and professional growth, preparing them for future work commitments.

6. How does your organisation promote intercultural exchange and understanding between European Solidarity Corps participants and the local community?

All host organisations actively promote intercultural exchange and understanding. By bringing together participants from different backgrounds, they seek to foster an environment of mutual respect, tolerance and appreciation of different cultures.

Above all, we try to make the linguistic immersion as complete as possible, putting the volunteers in contact with other young people to carry out leisure activities with the locals and to accompany them in everything that arises in their day-to-day life and that is thought to be beneficial for them.

Cultural events, language exchange programmes and community activities encourage ESC participants to interact with the local population, allowing them to get to know the host community better and enrich the intercultural experience.

7. Can you share challenges or obstacles that European Solidarity Corps participants may encounter during their stay in your organisation and how your organisation deals with them?

Although the placements are rewarding, participants may encounter difficulties during their experience. One of the most widespread difficulties common to all interviewees is the initial language barrier. However, host organisations anticipate these challenges and proactively address them by



providing a support system to help participants overcome language barriers, cultural differences, homesickness and work-related difficulties.

Integration is the main and fundamental objective according to all the organisations interviewed and they try to achieve it from the very beginning. The mentor is therefore a key figure in connecting volunteers to the local culture and community.

Everyone tells us that the local community has always been very welcoming and tries to make things easier. Living together can sometimes be difficult, but through constant constructive dialogue, they try to listen to any problems that arise and respond immediately before they become entrenched and unsolvable.

Regular training, mentoring and a positive working environment contribute to the resilience and overall well-being of participants.

8. What are the long-term benefits for European Solidarity Corps participants who complete their stay in your organisation? How do you support their personal and professional development?

Internships in a host organisation offer long-term benefits for CES participants. In addition to the immediate impact on the host community, participants develop greater self-confidence, a sense of adaptability and personal development. In addition to the clear improvement in employability, another key aspect is the development of the ability to cope with and manage setbacks and frustrations, which is essential in life.

Sometimes young people are diamonds in the rough and it is very satisfying to see their transformation on a personal and professional level at the end of their volunteering. As host organisations, the organisations provide references, certificates or further training opportunities that support the participants in their future academic and professional endeavours. They always keep in touch with them to see their progress and how they have resumed their lives.

9. How do you measure the impact and effectiveness of European Solidarity Corps projects and volunteers associated with your organisation?

Host organisations actively measure the impact and effectiveness of ESC projects and volunteers. No technical tools are used to measure impact, but results and improvements are observed on a day-to-day basis and a variety of evaluation methods are used, including direct feedback from participants.

These evaluations help organisations identify areas for improvement, demonstrate the value of ESC projects and improve the overall quality and impact of future editions.



10. Are there any specific requirements or qualifications that European Solidarity Corps participants must have in order to be eligible for a traineeship in your organisation?

In principle, everyone can participate in this type of experience, regardless of their academic background. All that is required is to be 18 years old and to be willing to live this experience.

However, some host organisations are more demanding and ask for specific requirements (language skills, academic background, specific motivation, etc.) in order for participants to be eligible to volunteer.

The associations interviewed, in particular, do not require prior knowledge of the local language because they believe that the young people will have time to learn it during the volunteering period; instead, they focus more on the motivation of the volunteers and try to ensure that they are committed, dynamic, eager to learn from others, with a great sense of humanity and the ability to adapt easily to changes.

In addition, the expertise of host organisations within the ESC programme is crucial in providing a stimulating and enabling environment for participants. By facilitating integration, offering various projects, providing support and guidance, promoting intercultural exchange and measuring impact, host organisations contribute to the overall success of the ESC programme. Their commitment contributes to the personal and professional growth of participants, while promoting positive change in local communities across Europe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, host organisations in the ESC programme play a key role in creating a transformative experience for participants. Through their dedication and support, they promote integration and empower young people to make a meaningful contribution to communities across Europe.

These organisations do everything possible to ensure the seamless integration of participants into the local community. From planning integration weeks to providing resources and encouraging participation in youth services, they create a welcoming environment in which participants can successfully move forward. By involving volunteers in local activities and partnerships, they actively promote their engagement with the community, fostering lasting bonds and meaningful relationships.

Ensuring the well-being and success of CES participants is a priority for host organisations. They provide continuous support and guidance through assigned mentors or supervisors, regular follow-ups and open communication channels. They also organise training sessions to equip participants with the necessary skills for their internship. Host organisations actively encourage capacity building



and professional growth, enabling participants to acquire transferable skills and prepare for future engagements.

The success of the ESC programme depends on the commitment and dedication of the host organisations. Their tireless efforts to facilitate integration, deliver diverse projects, provide support and guidance, promote intercultural exchange and measure impact contribute to positive change in local communities across Europe. Through their collective work, they empower ESC participants to become active European citizens and agents of transformation, leaving a lasting impact on both the participants and the communities in which they work.