

# Advocating for a just, inclusive and sustainable Erasmus+ and ESC Programme

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# INTRODUCTION

The creation of a just and sustainable society depends on fostering a strong sense of community, grounded in peace, solidarity, and intercultural education. “International Voluntary Service (IVS)” embodies these values by allowing young people to experience diversity firsthand, build solidarity, and challenge systems of inequality and exclusion. IVS brings people of all generations, cultures, and identities together to co-create meaningful, community-led responses to global challenges.

In this spirit, 179 international volunteer organisations - united under Alliance, ICYE, IBO, SCI networks and coordinated by CCIVS - call on the European Commission (EC), the members of the European Parliament (EP) and the European governments to prioritise young people, intercultural education, and global solidarity in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). These are our recommendations:

- Maintain a dedicated Youth Chapter within Erasmus+, with a minimum earmarking of 15%, to ensure the integrity of youth-led, participatory, and solidarity-based action.
- Erasmus+ objectives should continue to strengthen active citizenship, global solidarity, intercultural and intergenerational learning, and civic participation — going beyond competitiveness and labour market focus.
- Safeguard the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) as a separate programme with a dedicated budget. The ESC must retain its focus on volunteering, community action, and solidarity, not shift toward employability models.
- Maintain and adequately fund the three existing Key Actions, ensuring balance and accessibility across mobility, cooperation, and policy.
- Establish a Fourth Key Action exclusively for youth organisations from third (non-associated) countries with a minimum earmarking of 5%. This Key Action must promote multilateral cooperation between the EU and all global regions—not just EU + one region formats.
- Guarantee access to EU programmes for grassroots, youth-led, and community-based organisations, application systems must be simplified, decentralised, and inclusive. Too often, EU funding is captured by large, professionalised operators, sidelining smaller actors rooted in solidarity and local realities.

## RATIONALE

Young people aged 15 to 24 years make up 16% of the global population – around 1.2 billion in total [1] and on average 10.7% in Europe.[2] They have age-specific challenges and barriers – here an overview of some of them:

**Poverty:** Unemployment, poverty and social exclusion among young people in the EU are on the rise - the rate of youth unemployment is more than double of the overall unemployment rate [3] and young people are at a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion: “In 2024, 24.1% of the young people aged 15-29 in the EU (or 17.3 million) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion.”[4] Nearly every second young person in Europe is faced “with emotional or psychosocial difficulties due to pressures of unemployment, lower education and social exclusion.”[5]

**Political engagement:** Not only did fewer young people participate in the 2024 European elections compared to 2019, but they are also not sufficiently represented in positions of power: “While around 20% of Europe’s population is between 18 and 35 years old, only 6% of MEPs fall within this age range. In contrast, the 51 to 65 age group makes up a similar 20% of the population but holds 42% of parliamentary seats.” [6] Another trend among especially young men is the growing dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and the support of ideological extremes (with 21% in favour of far-right parties in the 2024 elections).[7]

While young people are participating less in the traditional, institutional political structures, they are still engaged as global citizens, engaging in a more decentralised and non-hierarchical way [8] – through digital activism, participation in youth-led organisations or involvement in movements, e.g. like the youth-led climate movement Fridays for Future.

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[1] [Youth | United Nations](#)

[2] [Youth across the European Union in 2022](#)

[3] [Ninth Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion](#), Page 51

[4] [Young people - social inclusion - Statistics Explained - Eurostat](#)

[5] <https://europeanhouse.hu/eu-youth-in-2024-resilient-engaged-but-still-facing-key-challenges/>

[6] Anna Lavizzari, 2025: Young people’s participation in the 2024 European elections. Page 19. Link: [0ea71421-f78b-fa96-f78f-9d16eca79012](#)

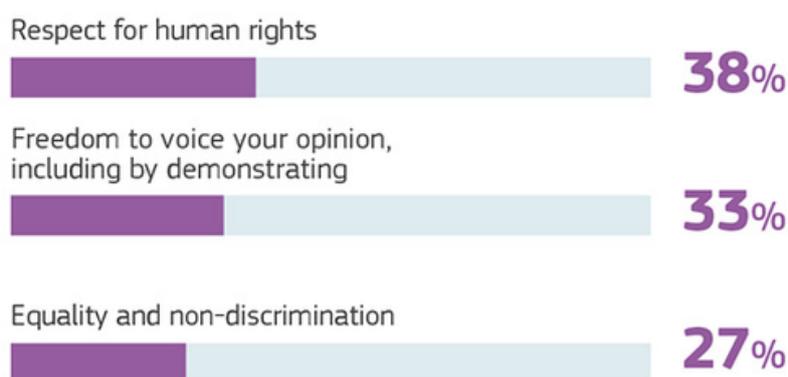
[7] [Full article: The youth gender gap in support for the far right](#)

[8] SALTO (2020). Youth Participation Strategy. Page 6. [Youth Participation Strategy](#)

In Europe [9] and globally, young people have been leading demonstrations and protests demanding reforms on issues such as corruption, lack of accountability, inequality, and unemployment.[10]

**Shrinking space for youth organisations:** Due to the rise of anti-democratic ideologies, violent conflicts/ war and the surge of nationalism, the spaces for youth organisations and networks are shrinking.[11] All the while, youth clearly highlight that peace and global stability, climate change and the political stability and security of the EU are key topics to them.[12] Additionally, they identified respect for human rights, freedom of expression and equality/ non-discrimination as the top main principles of democracy.[13]

### Main principles of democracy *Top 3 main principles*



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[9] An example are the student protests in Serbia in 2024 with young people exposing systemic failures and formulating broader democratic demands, [Serbia: Past the Point of No Return?](#)

[10] [Misunderstanding Youth Activism: How Young People Are Rewriting Democracy, Gen Z Movements and the “Future of Protest” | Forus](#)

[11] [240523\\_M-THE-SITUATION-OF-YOUTH-ORGANISATIONS-ACROSS-EUROPE.pdf](#)

[12] [EU challenges and priorities: young Europeans' views - März 2025 - - Eurobarometer survey.](#)

[13] [ibid](#)

**The global challenges of 2030 Agenda** - The Erasmus+ programme is a vital tool for tackling the interconnected global challenges of the new decade and advancing Europe's contribution to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.[14] Yet, with only five years left, global progress to reach the goals is faltering: only 35% of the SDGs are on track, almost half are moving too slowly, and 18% are regressing. [15] The UN's Youth2030 Global Progress Report (2025) [16] underlines the need to accelerate SDG implementation with and for young people by ensuring meaningful engagement, strengthening youth-led organisations, and increasing capacity and resources for their initiatives. Erasmus+ is uniquely placed to deliver these priorities, connecting millions of young people across borders, funding youth organisations, and integrating sustainability and inclusiveness into its objectives.

In view of these developments, it is key that Europe upholds its responsibility to its youth by maintaining the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) and the Erasmus+ frameworks as cornerstones of democracy, inclusion, and solidarity.

The aim of the EC with their proposal for a new Erasmus+ is to increase accessibility, widen the reach of the programme, enhance competences, promote EU values, democratic participation and societal engagement, solidarity, social inclusion, and equal opportunities in the EU and beyond. While these are important goals, the proposed structure of the EC proposal is putting these aims at risk. Especially the disappearance of the dedicated Youth Chapter (with earmarked funds to support youth organisations and non-formal education) threatens meaningful youth participation, risks silencing grassroots organisations by forcing them to compete with universities and private entities and undermines access for disadvantaged young people. [17]

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[14] Nogueiro, T.; Saraiva, M.; Jorge, F.; Chaleta, E. The Erasmus+ Programme and Sustainable Development Goals—Contribution of Mobility Actions in Higher Education. in Sustainability 2022, 14, 1628. ([PDF](#)) [The Erasmus+ Programme and Sustainable Development Goals—Contribution of Mobility Actions in Higher Education](#)

[15] [SDGs\\_Report\\_Key\\_Findings\\_2025.pdf](#)

[16] UN (20256), Youth2030: Progress Report 2025. Page 94. [Youth2030 Global Progress Report | Youth Office](#)

[17] 35% of participants reached through funding of the youth chapter were young people with fewer opportunities, compared to just 15% in the broader Erasmus+ programme.

The increase in budget from 26.2 billion for 2021-2027 to 40,8 billion for 2028-2033 is also less than perceived, as it does not account for inflation, nor that it contains the formerly separate budget for the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). New actions and the restructuring will also rather increase the pressure on the budget than ensure broader participation. [1] The Draghi report therefore highlighted that to “reach every young person in the EU, the funding of the programme would need to increase five-fold for the 2028-2034 programming period.”[18]

**The risk is that Erasmus+, rather than reducing inequalities, will reproduce existing patterns of privilege unless funding is increased dramatically to expand the programme's reach.**

The inclusion of the European Solidarity Corps and the removal of Key Action 3 — which supported democratic engagement and youth policy — further weaken youth participation, democratic engagement, and opportunities for solidarity.

The EU must reaffirm its promise to invest in youth, intercultural education, human rights, and solidarity, ensuring these values remain the foundation for peace, democracy, and a fairer future.

In view of the above, here are the following recommendations [20] to be considered when introducing changes to the MFF.

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[18] The European University Foundation additionally highlighted that “the proposed MFF indicates a decrease in the relative weight of Erasmus+ within the overall EU budget for the next programme period: increasing the budget by 0,3 points would already result in a significant improvement of the financial projections by around 6 billion EUR and maintain the same proportional share of the EU budget allocated to Erasmus+ in 2028-34.” MFF Policy Paper, page 2. [The EU long-term budget 2028-34 and Erasmus+ A call for matching the funding with policy priorities](#)

[19] Mario Draghi Report (2024), The future of European Competitiveness. Part B – In-depth analysis and recommendations. Page 268. [Mario Draghi Report \(2024\), The future of European Competitiveness. Part B – In-depth analysis and recommendations. Page 268.](#) [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en)

[20] <sup>[1]</sup> Our asks are based on those of the European Youth Forum: <https://www.youthforum.org/news/erasmus-reaction-on-new-mff>

## 1) Youth chapter & programme quality

**Maintain a dedicated Youth Chapter within Erasmus+, with a minimum earmarking of 15%, to ensure the integrity of youth-led, participatory, and solidarity-based action.**

IVS organisations support earmarking a minimum of 15% of the Erasmus+ budget for the Youth Chapter as it was highlighted by Erasmus+ coalition led by the European Youth Forum. It is critical to prevent reallocation to other sectors and to uphold the EU's Youth Strategy objectives, especially around engagement, connection, and empowerment which include promoting civic, political, and social participation, supporting connections and exchanges among young people, and enabling youth to lead their own lives through quality youth work.

Erasmus+ has transformed the lives of millions of young people, establishing itself as Europe's most powerful tool for inclusion and solidarity. However, despite its success, Erasmus+ currently reaches only around 15% of young people.[21]

This gap means that the vast majority of youth - particularly those from marginalised, rural, or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds - remain excluded from opportunities that could strengthen their democratic engagement and personal development.

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[21] Mario Draghi Report (2024), The future of European Competitiveness. Part B – In-depth analysis and recommendations. Page 268.  
[https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en)

**Erasmus+ objectives should continue to strengthen active citizenship, global solidarity, intercultural and intergenerational learning, and civic participation — going beyond competitiveness and labour market focus.**

Labour markets alone cannot address growing inequality or develop citizenship in our societies. Solidarity cultivates empathy, mutual aid, and collective responsibility, which are essential to reduce social divisions and to ensure that innovation and growth benefit all.

The current Erasmus+ programme explicitly emphasises inclusion and diversity as key priorities, alongside ecological transition, digital transformation and democratic participation: “The evaluation concluded that the four transversal priorities introduced in the 2021-2027 programme (inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, green transition, participation in democratic life and civic engagement) have had positive effects. Among these, inclusion and diversity has been widely perceived as the most successfully embedded and well implemented priority across all programme actions.”[22]

The World Economic Forum in their Future of Job Report 2025 [23] published a ranking of core skills employers consider important for their employees and at least half of these (to name just a few: creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, curiosity, motivation, empathy) are strengthened through international volunteering.

The Draghi report emphasises that one of Europe’s competitive deficits is underinvestment in skills and human capital, especially in advanced, high-value, and emerging sectors (e.g. technology, green industries).[24]

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[21] Mario Draghi Report (2024), The future of European Competitiveness. Part B – In-depth analysis and recommendations. Page 268.

[22] European Commission (2025), Interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and the final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme. Page 4. [eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0395](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0395)

[23] WEF (2025), Future of Jobs Report. Page 37.

[24] Mario Draghi Report (2024), Pages 257-279.

The ability of the workforce to adapt, innovate, and upskill is seen as central to closing productivity gaps. These skills are very difficult to develop if they are not worked on in conjunction with those skills linked to a personal and community or social development. The mentioned report also signals the need for “skills portability” [25] and cross-border recognition of competences, so that skills acquired in one member state remain useful elsewhere in the EU, thereby enhancing labour mobility and matching at EU level.

A review of intercultural understanding stresses that it enables respectful, productive interactions among diverse populations and is increasingly essential in a globalised world.

**Safeguard the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) as a separate programme with a dedicated budget. The ESC must retain its focus on volunteering, community action, and solidarity and not shift towards employability models.**

A February 2025 report highlights that the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) generates impact well beyond individual participants, benefiting entire communities. Data shows that 96% of local communities view ESC as having a positive influence on their lives and values.[26] However, only 35% of participants are young people with fewer opportunities, underlining the need for greater balance and accessibility across mobility, cooperation, and policy.[27]

While both Erasmus+ and ESC already support labour market preparation, their core mission should remain active citizenship, solidarity, intercultural and intergenerational learning, and civic participation. The February 2025 Conference report [28] stresses that the ESC mobility programme strengthens civic engagement, builds trust, and fosters belonging among youth, making the EU more tangible.

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[25] Also see: [Strengthening labour mobility through the Skills Portability Initiative \(SPI\)| Europass](#)

[26] European Commission (2025), [Factual Summary Report](#) of the Public Consultation on the European Solidarity Corps. Page 2.

[27] Šojdrová, M. (2023), [Draft report](#) on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme 2021-2027 (2023/2018(INI)). Committee on Culture and Education. Page 5.

[28] [Report-stakeholders-conference-February-2025\\_en.pdf](#)

Similarly, youth volunteering - especially when connected across national and international levels - promotes intercultural understanding: “The programme strengthens European identity and fosters support for European values, such as democracy and human rights. The programme creates extensive pan-European networks, fostering long-term partnerships that facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaborative initiatives across Europe and beyond”.[29]

ESC also supports the current Youth Goal #1 by connecting young people with the EU and reinforcing democratic values through participation. By investing in youth volunteering, the ESC mobility programme empowers young people, reinforces European values at grassroots level, and builds a more united, inclusive Europe where solidarity is lived in practice.

**Maintain and adequately fund the three existing Key Actions, ensuring balance and accessibility across mobility, cooperation, and policy.**

The division of the current Youth Chapter into three Key Actions is key to ensure clarity and access for different actors and to shape models of citizens who are able to respond not only to a demanding and exclusionary productive world, but also to a socially fragmented and unequal one [30]:

- KA1 empowers individuals by improving their learning performance and increasing social awareness, tolerance, and active participation in society.
- KA2 builds capable institutions and networks, by enabling organisations to cooperate transnationally to develop, transfer and implement innovative practices and reduce barriers for grassroots organisations.

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[29] EC Report on the interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps and final evaluation of the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps. Page 10.

[30] <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/part-b-actions-covered>

- KA3 ensures the policy environment supports and sustains those individual and institutional gains, by shaping, exploring with and implementing education, training, youth and sport policies across the EU. It places emphasis on gathering knowledge to reduce risk of policy failing due to insufficient understanding of challenges and helps harmonise systems to ensure mobility and cooperation across borders.

In its evaluation report, the European Commission confirms the high cost-effectiveness of Key Action 1 and that “these activities brought significant benefits to learners, staff and their organisations.”[31] It highlights the demand for funding under Key Action 2 and recognises “the long-term and systemic benefits of actions supporting policy development and cooperation (key action 3).”[32] The EC also outlines strong internal coherence and a clear and consistent structure as well as a “high degree of complementarity of key actions and an increasing focus on cross-sectoral collaboration”[33] of the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme.

Especially the disappearance of Key Action 3, which supported youth participation, democratic engagement, and youth policy development, is worrying. The European Youth Forum highlighted that removing the Key Actions “risks undermining the interconnected system that they create, and by extension those in the youth sector that count on it.”[34]

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[31] European Commission (2025), Interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and the final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme. Page 8.

[32] Ibid, page 9

[33] Ibid, page 12

[34] Young people take a blow in the European Commission’s proposal for the post-2027 Erasmus budget | European Youth Forum

## 2) Accessibility, inclusion & cohesion

**Establish a Fourth Key Action exclusively for youth organisations from third (non-associated) countries with a minimum earmarking of 5%. This Key Action must promote multilateral cooperation between the EU and all global regions—not just EU + one region formats.**

In 2022, out of 4,816 youth projects contracted under Erasmus+ calls, only four were awarded directly to countries not associated with the Programme and involved 19 organisations - compared to 22,235 organisations from the EU and associated countries that implement Erasmus+ funded projects. While the EU and associated countries received €269,131,944, the “other countries” received only €685,042, which represents about 0.25 percent of the total budget.[35]

In 2023, out of 5,481 youth projects contracted under calls, only eight were awarded directly to countries not associated with the Programme, involving 57 organisations, compared to 23,054 organisations from EU and associated countries. Whereas EU and associated countries received €333,245,640, the other countries received only €2,012,000, which corresponds to about 0.60 percent of the total budget.[36]

Overall, the data shows that while funding for non-associated third countries remains limited, there was a slight increase in both the number of projects and the share of the budget between 2022 and 2023.

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[31] European Commission (2025), Interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and the final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme. Page 8.

[32] Ibid, page 9

[33] Ibid, page 12

[34] Young people take a blow in the European Commission's proposal for the post-2027 Erasmus budget. | European Youth Forum

[35] Erasmus+ Annual Report 2022

[36] Erasmus+ Annual Report 2023

While young people with fewer opportunities in Europe also face a range of barriers, including disabilities, health conditions, inequalities in education and training systems, cultural differences, social and economic obstacles, discrimination, and geographical disadvantages,[37] youth organisations and participants in non-associated countries can face additional barriers compounded by challenges such as restrictive visas, higher travel costs, weaker institutional infrastructures, and limited access to EU-funded networks. By introducing a dedicated earmarking of 5% of the Erasmus+ Youth Chapter budget for organisations from non-associated countries, the programme would make its stated values of fairness, inclusion, and diversity truly global, turning principle into practice and ensuring that young people outside the EU are not left behind.

### **Erasmus+ - environment & climate change**

Countries in the Global South are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change despite contributing the least to global emissions and resource consumption.[38] Excluding youth organisations from these regions would therefore not only undermine the Erasmus+ stated goal of engaging “a wide spectrum of players in our society” but would also neglect the voices and experiences of those most directly confronted with the consequences of climate change and environmental inequality. A dedicated 5% earmarking would make Erasmus+ a more credible and effective instrument for addressing the dual priorities of climate action and civic engagement.

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[37] [A-guide-to-recommendations-for-working-with-young-people-with-fewer-opportunities.pdf](#) page 8+9.

[38] [Power of Global North vs. Global South](#) and [Quantifying national responsibility for climate breakdown](#)

**Guarantee access to EU programmes for grassroots, youth-led, and community-based organisations, application systems must be simplified, decentralised, and inclusive. Too often, EU funding is captured by large, professionalised operators, sidelining smaller actors rooted in solidarity and local realities.**

The complexity of centralised application systems managed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the technicality of forms, and the heavy reporting requirements have historically discouraged grassroots organisations from applying.[39] Although the Commission has recently introduced simplification measures such as lump sums and unit costs to reduce administrative burden, these innovations are not yet sufficient to level the playing field: “The evaluation suggested that programme procedures could be simplified further in order to further reduce the administrative burden.”[40]

Decentralisation is another critical issue. Actions managed by National Agencies tend to be more accessible due to local language support, closer accompaniment, and shorter evaluation cycles. Small-Scale Partnerships, introduced in Erasmus+ 2021–2027 with fixed grants of €30,000 or €60,000, have demonstrated their ability to attract first-time applicants and micro-organisations.

The lack of access to funding contradicts the EU’s own priority of Inclusion and Diversity, enshrined in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide and operationalised through the Commission’s Inclusion Action Plan.[41]

Research confirms that disadvantaged youth benefit most from participation in mobility and volunteering programmes, yet access remains uneven without targeted support.[42]

[39] EU Youth Programmes Unpacked, page 48

[40] European Commission (2025), Interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and the final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme. Page 9.

[41] European Commission (2021), Implementation guidelines - Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy.

[42] RAY Network (2020). Research-based Analysis of Erasmus+: Inclusion Reports. <https://www.researchyouth.eu>

Beyond fairness, the overrepresentation of large operators undermines community ownership. Grassroots organisations are embedded in local realities, have greater trust within communities, and are best positioned to reach “hard-to-reach” youth.[43] Conversely, concentration of funding among large NGOs creates risks of standardisation, professional capture, and reduced diversity of voices.[44] The result is a system where solidarity is implemented from the top down, rather than built through partnerships rooted in mutuality and local agency.

One key step is to expand decentralised access points, ensuring that simplified schemes such as Small-Scale Partnerships are open to non-associated countries through regional hubs, National Agency-led consortia, or EU Delegations. These mechanisms should rely on lump sums and results-based reporting, rather than complex financial justifications, allowing smaller and newer actors to engage without disproportionate administrative burdens.

Monitoring progress through indicators like the share of projects led by grassroots actors and the success rate of first-time applicants would help ensure this shift is measurable and sustained.[45]

Complementing this, stronger pre-award support systems—including mentoring, webinars in local languages, step-by-step toolkits, and peer coaching—should be established via National Agencies, SALTO Resource Centres, and EU Delegations. This approach would help reduce barriers linked to technical expertise and language proficiency, empowering smaller structures to compete on a more equal footing.

Financial flexibility is another essential condition for fair access. The EU should ease co-financing and cash-flow requirements by allowing flexible or waived co-financing for micro-structures and increasing pre-financing rates to at least 80% for grassroots organisations. This would directly address the liquidity constraints that disproportionately affect smaller actors.

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[43] OECD (2020). Engaging Youth in Inclusive Development.  
<https://www.oecd.org/development>

[44] European Youth Forum (2022). Policy Paper on Erasmus+ and Inclusion.  
<https://www.youthforum.org>

[46] *ibid*

At the same time, improving transparency and diversification monitoring through the annual publication of funding distribution data —by size and type of organisation—would make it easier to track progress. Introducing caps or diversification targets could further prevent the overconcentration of funds among a handful of large beneficiaries.

Finally, a long-term culture of inclusion depends on the ability to develop robust inclusion indicators. Collecting and publishing disaggregated data on participant profiles, first-time beneficiaries, and post-project outcomes for disadvantaged youth would make it possible to evaluate what works and what doesn't.

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This document is presented by the international IVS networks:

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