

## Volunteering in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic

The SARS-Covid-19 outbreak took everyone off guard as the EU was already struggling to address the global warming problem and the migration issue. The focus of EU strategy toward partner nations completely shifted in a matter of weeks. According to the "Global Response to Covid-19" policy proposed by the European Union, financial assistance to EU partner nations would increase for the commercial and agricultural sectors as well as the health and social sectors. With borders closed and airlines grounded for almost six months, COVID-19 effectively shut down the global tourism industry at a scale never witnessed before. Besides leisure travel, restriction of movement threatened to destroy the international volunteer sector and NGOs, devastating the projects that depend on them for support. The pandemic has especially hit hard the recruitment of international volunteers, with some organisations already forced to reinvent their activities. It affected thus the carrying out of the many activities, which were ongoing or planned under the Erasmus+ programme and European Solidarity Corps. The European Commission's main objective was and is the safety and protection of all Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps participants, while fully respecting all the containment measures taken at national level. As Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps are mainly implemented through the National Agencies in the programme countries, National Agencies have been asked to closely follow the problems faced by participants, especially young people, who were then abroad so that immediate and adequate support could be provided to them. It was working to help students, pupils, volunteers and other participants in the programmes deal with the consequences for them.

At the end of April, the European Commission launched a short survey aimed at collecting the views of mobility participants in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps on how the Covid-19 outbreak affected the ordinary course of their Erasmus+ or European Solidarity Corps mobility activities. The survey was sent to over 57,000 participants representing all types of mobility supported under the programmes and corresponding to 40% of the estimated number of people in mobility at the time of the Coronavirus outbreak. Close to 11,800 participants in mobility activities under Erasmus+ programme and European Solidarity Corps completed the questionnaire. The overall population of Erasmus+ participants registered in Mobility Tool+ and having mobilities overlapping the period of 15 February onwards is 142,801. The respective number for European Solidarity Corps participants is 1,050. The main findings show that approximately 25% of the surveyed participants were not (or were only mildly) affected by the situation, while from the remaining 75% of the surveyed participants, whose activities were affected by the pandemic, for 17% of Erasmus+ youth and European Solidarity Corps respondents the activity was definitely cancelled, more than 50% of the European Solidarity Corps participants stayed abroad and the reasons given were:

- preferred to stay (57%)
- initially preferred to stay, but now thinking of going back (9%)
- were asked to stay by their organisation, institution, etc. (7%)
- had/have difficulties in returning home (19%)
- other reasons (8%)

The survey enquired about the level of satisfaction of participants who asked for information, support and guidance from different bodies, directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of the programmes. The satisfaction rate of participants is generally positive as shown in the figure below:

### Satisfaction rate of participants in relation to the support provided by:

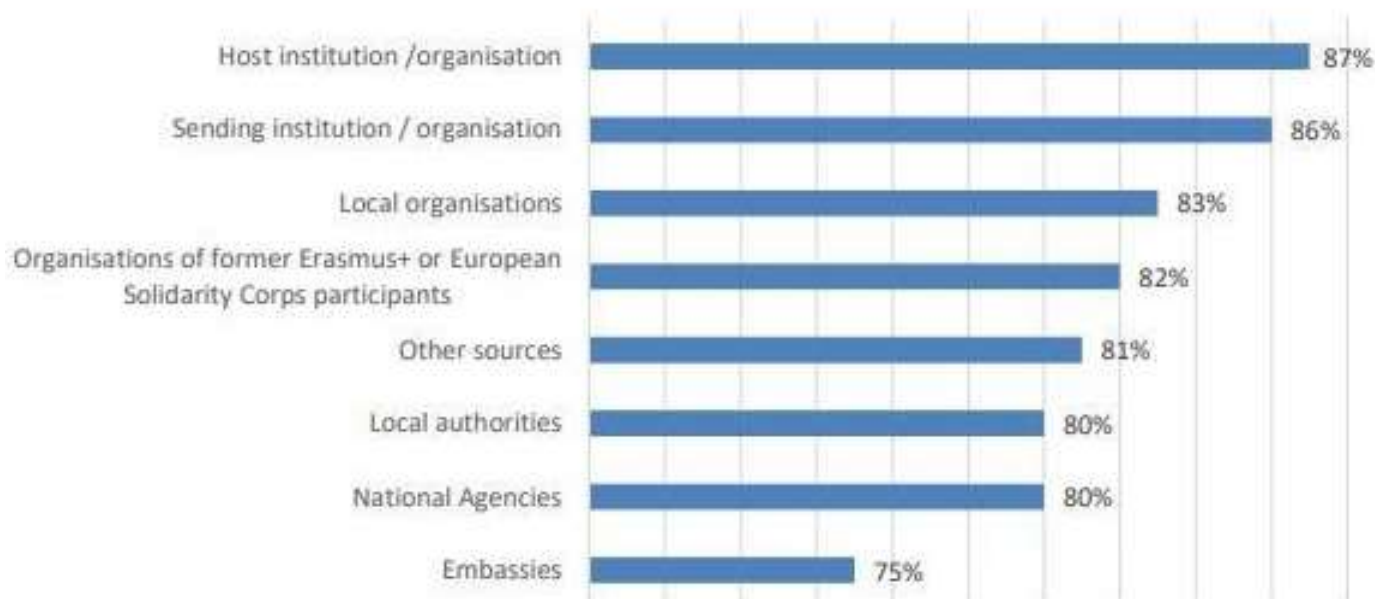


Figure 1. [https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/coronavirus-mobility-impact-results-may2020\\_en.pdf](https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/coronavirus-mobility-impact-results-may2020_en.pdf)

In general terms, European Solidarity Corps participants seem more satisfied with the information, support, guidance provided to them, especially from organisations of former Erasmus+ or European Solidarity Corps participants (90%) and local organisations (87%).

Regarding the financial support from both programmes, 68% of respondents - whose activities were affected by the Covid-19 crisis - declared that they have fully or partially received the EU grant to which they are entitled. 12% of the participants have asked (or intended to ask for) additional financial support in order to cover extra costs incurred due to this exceptional situation. Out of these participants: the majority of them (68%) did not know at that stage whether they would receive the additional support or not; 18% of respondents have been informed that they would receive an extra support; while for 5% of them the support has not been agreed.

Based on their personal experience, surveyed participants were asked to give “ideal advice” to those people who would have planned to carry out mobility in the coming months. Regarding their first preference:

- 55% of respondents would have preferred to postpone the start of the mobility until the situation would have gotten back to normal
- 31% of respondents would have preferred to start their mobility, if possible, virtual and then use the opportunity for an experience abroad
- 9% of participants would have opted for cancelling the mobility period
- 5% would have been ready to replace physical mobility entirely by virtual activities if there was no other alternative

As a conclusion, the European Commission tried to have the maximum flexibility they could in the implementation of the programme, within the limits of the applicable legal framework.