Stop Loneliness Start Volunteering

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering

Policy Recommendations

A plain language summary is available at this link.

INTRODUCTION

Young adults have been the most severely hit by social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of people aged 18-25 who reported feeling lonely almost quadrupled in the first half of 2020[1]. As a recognition of the sacrifices and resilience that young people have made during the pandemic and an opportunity to engage and support youth at the EU level, the European Commission declared 2022 the European Year of Youth[2] (EYY). One of the key priorities of the EYY was to support young people's personal, social and professional development, including attention to mental health, in line with the EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027. Mental health and wellbeing is one of the 11 goals of the Strategy aimed at promoting an evidence based approach and reducing the stigma related to mental health issues. This area has direct interlinkages with the need to identify and mitigate the effects of youth loneliness emphasising the urgency and importance to prevent long-term consequences. The 2022 Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy also confirmed that health and wellbeing are among the top priorities for young people themselves[3].

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre is doing research on the topic of loneliness and social isolation in the EU youth, highlighting its relevance among European Institutions. However little has been done in terms of policies to tackle loneliness in youth

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[1] Joint Research Centre, *Loneliness in the EU. Insights from surveys and online media data*, 2021, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC125873
[2] European Year of Youth 2022 website, https://youth.europa.eu/year-of-youth_en#:~:text=2022%20was%20the%20European%20Year,voice%2C%20and%20it%20was%20heard!
[3] European Commission, *Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth: Young Europeans are increasingly engaged*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_2774

and developing related programmes.

The Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Erasmus+ Project findings indicate that there is significant evidence in favour of volunteering programmes as an effective means to alleviate the feeling of loneliness and exclusion in young people. Based on the research done, project partners recognised the need to develop specific recommendations for policymakers, emphasising the importance of creating and supporting volunteering programmes that foster social inclusion of youths. Additionally, these recommendations are intended to guide the organisations involved in the volunteering programmes, helping them to implement effective strategies that address the social needs of young people through volunteering initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICIANS

1. PROMOTING VOLUNTEERING AS A MEANS TO TACKLE LONELINESS IN YOUTH

Volunteering is not only an outstanding source of preventing and alleviating social isolation of young people but also a way to provide empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers. At the European and national level, there is still a significant gap in policies that directly address the issue of loneliness among youth. To address this, **policymakers should develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at tackling loneliness and isolation in youth**, both enabling and encouraging a deeper understanding of the value and benefits of volunteering and quality volunteering programmes as a means in supporting young people who face loneliness or poor living conditions[4].

Even if loneliness and social isolation are increasingly becoming recognised as public issues that need to be addressed with effective policy interventions, there is still social stigma around the topic in several European Countries. Loneliness and social isolation are not only harmful to mental and physical health but can have significant consequences for social

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[4] Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Erasmus+ Project, *Good Practice Compendium*, https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_e50e0fd46fcf4cb19db185afa29de3d2.pdf

cohesion and community trust at the societal level[5]. Interventions for youth are crucial to prevent the experience of loneliness from becoming chronic and therefore shaping the future of today's youth. **Tailored outreach strategies should be developed** taking into account cultural differences, varying levels of loneliness, and preferences for volunteer activities among participants. Addressing youth isolation and loneliness requires a multifaceted approach, where volunteering is recognised as a vital tool. By promoting the value of volunteering, and harmonising loneliness interventions while respecting national contexts, policymakers can more effectively combat the challenges of social isolation and enhance social cohesion among young people in Europe.

2. BUILDING MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Loneliness interventions are often targeted at older adults. Yet, it is clear that **tailored interventions are** also **needed for young people**. Ensuring that monitoring and evaluation systems are embedded into volunteering programmes tackling isolation in youth would help develop an evidence base for such policies. The evidence can then be used to improve strategies and interventions and therefore enable an even bigger impact among those that need support. Local communities have a crucial role to play in monitoring and evaluating the programmes as well as researchers and practitioners from organisations working in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion. Collaboration and exchange between these actors are fundamental to design, implement and monitor programmes to reduce loneliness among youth. Policymakers should facilitate interventions built on holistic approaches that include actions and collaboration across fields and sectors to be more effective.

3. RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION

More European-wide efforts should be made to build evidence and provide more and better data on youth facing isolation and exclusion in Europe. Policy makers should **empower statistics agencies, research institutes, experts and expert organisations to identify,**

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[5] Joint Research Centre - European Commission, *Policy considerations for loneliness interventions*, 2023, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC133369

quantify and record any organisations involved in dealing with loneliness and isolation among youth and the positive impact of volunteering in their life path. The use of evaluation findings is crucial to identify areas for improvement and develop future policies related to volunteering as a means to combat loneliness and isolation in young people. A specific Eurobarometer on youth and loneliness could be an interesting path to explore taking as a model the 2022 Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy.

4. AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Recognising loneliness and isolation as a source of distress in young people is not enough. Combating loneliness and isolation should be high on the list of priorities on the social and political agenda. **Policymakers should launch awareness campaigns** that can be integrated in schools and universities as well as in non-formal education providers programmes, aimed to reach and motivate young people to use volunteering as a tool for combating loneliness, isolation and thus social exclusion. These could include narratives that challenge stereotypes, dissolve the stigma surrounding loneliness and address consequences on personal wellbeing. The campaigns should not only target individuals but also volunteer-involving organisations, employers, formal & non-formal education institutions and organisations as well as society at large, encouraging these actors to undertake initiatives designed to face loneliness in youth.

5. COOPERATION AMONG STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to cooperation at European level, cooperation on a national and local level is also crucial in order to put in place suitable and appropriate arrangements to implement volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth. The **stakeholders involved in the volunteering programmes should be engaged in a regular structured dialogue** with policymakers on all matters related to volunteering as a means to combat loneliness and isolation in youth. Through this structured dialogue, the various actors involved will ensure that combating loneliness in youth through volunteering remains relevant. From this, the demand is to regularly review and update the aforementioned volunteering programmes in response to emerging trends, best practices, and feedback from stakeholders and youth.

Policymakers should enhance this community building among all multiple stakeholders involved in the implementation and development of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness through European-wide events mobilising and engaging bottom-up volunteer-involving organisations and youths.

6. STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Policymakers should enable and support civil society organisations, youth organisations, national volunteer development agencies, and volunteering centres dealing with loneliness and isolation as they are key stakeholders in providing support. Civil society not only provides various social interventions in the communities but also has the potential to raise awareness and create space for youth engagement and volunteering as one of the main tools in preventing and fighting against raising issues of youth loneliness and isolation. **Policymakers should invest more in the motivation, education and mentorship of volunteer-involving organisations** so that they have a greater understanding of, and capacity to deliver, volunteer programmes that support and involve young people affected by loneliness and isolation.

7. DEVELOPING TOOLS: THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS PROGRAMME (ESC) & CLIVE PROJECT

At the European level, the most current EU policy related to volunteering is the European Solidarity Corps Programme. The increase in its budget[6] gave more visibility and importance to volunteering in the EU member states. Yet, it didn't reach its potential in the perception of volunteering as an effective means to tackle loneliness for the individual and an element of social cohesion for the society. The introduction of new selection criteria for organisations to host volunteers under the quality label of the programme is a good step ahead towards the improvement of the ESC programme and is meant to increase the quality and the sustainability of the projects proposed in the ESC platform. **Policymakers should strengthen the ESC programme highlighting its unique identity** as the only EU programme

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[6] European Commission, *European Solidarity Corps - Performance*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en

focussed on embedding solidarity in a thriving European democracy[7]. Moreover, policymakers should push to increase the number of projects dealing with mental health and social isolation in youth.

The **Centre for European Volunteering coordinated** in 2023 the implementation of the **"Combating Loneliness and Isolation with Volunteers in Europe (CLIVE)" project** in Belgium, Italy, Malta, Poland and Portugal[8]. The project involved 66 young volunteers from Europe and aimed to combat the increasing loneliness that had emerged as a result of Covid-19 lockdowns and to tackle the negative effects that prolonged isolation has had on social cohesion and people's mental health. The project goal was to reverse this trend among groups who have been most affected by lockdown loneliness. In the short term the beneficiary groups of the CLIVE project: young people; elderly people; and people with disabilities, were able to feel relieved from the loneliness and isolation they were feeling. In the mid-term, the beneficiaries improved their mental health as well as increased social inclusion in their home communities. Thanks to the project activities, they shared and developed new connections with others, leading to improvements in their emotional health as positive stimuli and developed positive social relationships. As a result, they are more capable of combating their feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The volunteers who participated in the CLIVE project experienced a unique high-quality opportunity where they exchanged ideas, knowledge and reflection during 16 days with other young people opening their vision towards personal and professional development in a multicultural atmosphere. The volunteers went back to their home countries with higher ambition and confidence to start to search for different opportunities such as volunteering and training to meet new people, empower their capacities, progress and generate an impact in the community, getting close to realising their full potential.

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[7] Centre for European Volunteering, *Volunteering: The keys to unlocking the potential*, 2024
[8] Centre for European Volunteering Website, CLIVE webpage,
https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/clive

Policymakers should **support the creation of environments** within educational institutions, community centres, and online platforms **where young people can easily access information about volunteering opportunities and receive support** in joining these programmes. This could include mentorship programmes, peer support networks, and tailored outreach efforts to engage isolated youths.

8. PUBLIC FUNDING

The lack of public funding for initiatives for youth facing loneliness and isolation can act as a barrier. Policymakers should allocate public funding for the development of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth and for the research and implementation of monitoring and evaluating systems. **European, national and/or local public authorities should offer financial incentives or grants to the organisations involved in tackling loneliness** and cover associated costs. European funding can also help in investing in transnational projects to share good practices among EU member states.

8.1 BUDGETS SHOULD BE MADE AVAILABLE TO PILOT LARGE SCALE QUALITY VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMMES TACKLING LONELINESS IN YOUTH

Policymakers should enhance the upscaling and sustainability of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth through larger pilots and experimentations across multiple EU member states. This is an essential step towards collecting knowledge related to best practice and evidence-based practice for the implementation of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness. This is crucial in order to further improve future programmes and better inform future policy decisions. Furthermore, these piloting schemes will increase awareness of volunteering programmes, generating a conversation within the public sphere about the benefits of volunteering programmes tackling loneliness and further opening the door to successful future programmes.

9. RECOGNISE AND AWARD BEST PRACTICES OF IMPLEMENTING QUALITY VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMMES TACKLING LONELINESS IN YOUTH

To support volunteering programmes tackling loneliness, **it is important to recognise the effort of the organisations involved and the impact of that effort**. It is also proper to motivate others by awarding the good practices of implementing those programmes. Additional public funds should be allocated to award civil society organisations dealing with the topic of isolation in youth in order to ensure its sustainability and legacy as a driver for further take up.

ATTACHMENTS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Policymakers need to address the issue of combating isolation among young people and supporting volunteering programmes aimed at alleviating the problem. However, **organisations active in the field** of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion also **play a crucial role** in the successful implementation and development of these programmes.

1. **ADVOCACY FOR BETTER POLICIES AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES**

   Organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should organise awareness campaigns on the topic of youth isolation in schools and in non-formal education centres**, through social media and organising community events. Moreover, organisations **should advocate for the development and implementation of better policies** emphasising the role of volunteering as a means to combat loneliness in youth. Organisations should also demand an increase in funding for volunteering programmes related to loneliness in young people.

2. **CAPACITY BUILDING**

   Organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should enable and encourage their staff and volunteers to attend training**

and capacity building activities on how to organise volunteering programmes and to guide young volunteers in these programmes.

Digital technology can be used to ease access to and increase the potential outreach for volunteering projects tackling loneliness and isolation. Indeed it is crucial that not only policy makers are aware of this but also any organisations involved in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion. They must be conscious of the use of these tools and equipped with the right knowledge and resources to engage with them effectively[9].

3. **FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING**

Collaboration and knowledge exchange is essential for the improvement of future volunteering programmes tackling loneliness in youth. **Organisations** active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should be open to dialogue and collaborate with each other**. They should join existing networks focused on the topic to keep up to date with research, policies and programmes. Hosting and participating in workshops, webinars, and conferences on combating loneliness and isolation in youth through volunteering can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences among stakeholders and experts.

4. **IMPLEMENTING MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS**

Organisations active in the field of loneliness, youth volunteering, youth, and social exclusion **should implement monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness of volunteering programmes** tackling loneliness and isolation in youth. These insights are useful for the improvement of future programmes and as a base for the development of requested policies to policymakers. Collaboration and exchange between these actors and policymakers is fundamental in order to design,

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[9] Centre for European Volunteering, *Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 #BEV2030*, 2021, https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_0e028c421bd14adcbd69bdbe744a0313.pdf

implement and monitor programmes to reduce loneliness among youth, ensuring at the same time that the monitoring and evaluation systems are compatible with broader data-gathering frameworks.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Erasmus+ project was developed in response to increasing hardship amongst the youth due to isolation and loneliness. Contrary to common belief, research indicates that it is predominantly young people, rather than elderly people, who experience feelings of loneliness. The pandemic and Covid-19 related measures have caused many hardships and have hit the youth particularly hard, as many were deprived of normal schooling and social life, and have had to face sickness and death of their family members. Much less, if any, attention was paid by the society as a whole to what consequences the young themselves will endure. The situation was and is especially dire for the youth who have been living in poor conditions before the pandemic, for those from poor families, living in a violent environment, and for those who have much fewer opportunities in life due to their circumstances.

Volunteering offers at the very least a partial solution to this problem. The main goal of the project is to raise awareness about volunteering as a possible means of preventing and alleviating the social isolation of the youth and as a source of empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers. The project produced:

- The "Research analysis of civil society organisations challenges and responses to tackle loneliness, isolation and exclusion of youth";
- The "Good Practice Compendium";
- The "Voice of Youth" Web Campaign;
- The "Building bridges to volunteer communities" guidelines;
- The "Handbook for volunteering organisations";
- Policy recommendations for politicians and organisations.