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EDF’s Response to the European Solidarity Corps

The European Disability Forum (EDF) is the European umbrella organisation representing the interests of 80 million persons with disabilities in Europe. EDF’s mission is to ensure that persons with disabilities have full access to fundamental and human rights through their active involvement in policy development and implementation in Europe. EDF is a member of the International Disability Alliance and works closely with the European institutions, the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

In order to ensure that the voices of young people with disabilities are properly answered and heard, in 2001 EDF established a Youth Committee and a wider youth network. The Committee and the network are following and giving input in all agenda points of the European Union (EU)S that are linked to youth.

Introduction

EDF welcomes the European Commission’s initiative on European Solidarity Corps. Ahead of submitting its response to the second consultation on the European Solidarity Corps, EDF would like to take the opportunity to issue an initial response to the first outline of the European Solidarity Corps. This response is based on a preliminary consultation of EDF Youth Committee members and draws from EDF’s past work on employment and social policy, including EDF’s Alternative Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In the past weeks months, EDF undertook detailed discussions with
its wider youth network and partners in order to submit a comprehensive input to the consultation by April 2017. EDF responded the first consultation.

The European Solidarity Corps and People with Disabilities

The European Solidarity Corps aim at enhancing solidarity activities among young people and organisations in Europe. The European Solidarity Corps is targeted at young people (18-30 years, application possible as of 17 years). The programme will offer young people the choice between two different strands: a volunteering strand and an occupational strand. Young people will be placed in one of these two strands for a period of 2 to 12 months.

Volunteering is very high among young persons with disabilities, who are often engaged and involved in organisation on a voluntary basis. The occupational strand would be also an important occasion for young people with disabilities since the unemployment rate of young people with disabilities is higher than the one of young people without disabilities. Inclusive, quality volunteering and employment promote social participation, independence, as well as a sense of contribution to the national economy and growth and social life.

For these reasons, EDF suggests that the European Commission includes young people with disabilities and fewer opportunities following the model of the in Erasmus+ Programme and the European Voluntary Service, where specific measures are proposed and financial support given.

Mainstreaming the disability perspective across the European Solidarity Corps

In 2011, the European Union (EU) ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and became the first inter-governmental organisation to ratify any United Nations (UN) human rights treaty. In 2015, the EU was reviewed by the CRPD Committee on its progress in implementing the Convention, based on the EU progress
report, and received recommendations from the Committee in September 2015. These recommendations are known as the Concluding Observations (CO) and they give clear guidance to the EU on how to better promote, protect and ensure the rights of persons with disabilities in the EU.

Taking this into account, actions and principles of the European Solidarity Corps must take into consideration the situation and the implementation of UN CRPD for young people with disabilities.

Data and statistics confirm that persons with disabilities face discrimination in various areas including access to employment, education, life-long learning, social protection, social and health services. As mentioned in the European Commission’s communication on the Social Pillar, the impact of the economic crisis has been harsher on persons with disabilities and their families compared to the general population, impacting more significantly on women and girls with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities of every age still remain excluded from the social life and the labour market: facing widespread discrimination, inaccessible transport and workplaces, and the risk of loosing disability allowances, persons with disabilities are often unemployed or dissuaded from actively seeking for a job. The European Solidarity Corp must therefore take this situation into account and encourage young people with disabilities to participate in the programmes by offering the necessary support.

While appreciating that the communication on the European Solidarity Corp states that “all young people should be able to participate irrespective of their background, education level of skills or disability”, EDF is also concerned that the rights and principles enshrined in the UN CRPD are not fully included throughout the text.

The Article 2 of the UN CRPD defines “reasonable accommodations” as “necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Such
necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments must be included in the programme of the European Solidarity Corps to ensure that young people with disabilities can fully access to the projects on equal basis with others.

EDF appreciates the concept of the European Solidarity Corps, however it is also important that this programme does not lead to exploitation and forced labour. Very often young persons with disabilities are relegated to low paid jobs or work settings without the possibility to access the open labour market. Due to lack of adequate training and the persistence of negative stereotypes, young persons with disabilities have fewer opportunities to develop their careers and access the labour market. The European Solidarity Corp must take this situation into account and include provisions prevent exploitation and forced labour of young people with disabilities.

While the communication specifies that disadvantaged young people who face additional barriers to entering the labour market (e.g. young people living in poverty or with disabilities) could be further supported, the section on the costs coverage does not include a specific mention to the coverage of disability-related costs. In order to align the European Solidarity Corps with the UN CRPD, the European Commission must ensure that disability-related costs are fully covered.

EDF Youth Committee recommends the European Commission to propose short terms project for all young people irrespective of their background and ensure that the length of projects within the European Solidarity Corps does not cause a barrier for young people with disabilities. Young people with disabilities might require time to adapt and a short project would not give them the necessary time to fully participate in their project. The Youth Committee recommends linking a shorter term project to solidarity events or actions.

Information, communication and other services of the programme and projects of the European Solidarity Corps must be fully accessible to young people with disabilities. This also include information and communication to be provided in an easy-to-read form to be fully accessible by both young people with intellectual disabilities as well as people that might not be familiar with the language used. The Web Accessibility Directive must be fully
implemented through the European Solidarity Corps to ensure that young persons do not face barriers and discrimination on the basis of their disability.

Looking at the provisions of other EU programme, including the Erasmus+ programme and the European Voluntary Service, the European Solidarity Corps must include:

- A provision on the to organize an advanced planning visit (APV)
- Reinforced mentorship to benefit permanent mentoring
- Allocation of budget to cover disability-related costs