

Building inclusive communities: volunteering for participation

Experiences, testimonies and ideas
for intercultural and open activities



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Who this booklet is for

This booklet comes from "Volunteering experiences for inclusive learning: Community relief, protection and sustainability" (VEIL-CORPS), a European Solidarity Corps project that in 2025 and 2026 organised volunteering teams in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In these activities, young people with very different life stories worked side by side, and a significant share of them came from situations of social, economic or personal disadvantage.

It is meant for anyone who organises, or would like to organise, international volunteering experiences, not only within programmes funded by the European Union: youth associations, hosting and supporting organisations, social services, and people who act as group leaders or mentors.

The booklet has three parts. The first describes the project, how it was carried out, and why inclusion in European mobility is a question that concerns every organisation. The second gives a voice to those who took part in the team volunteering activities first-hand: young volunteers, group leaders and organisations. This part also draws on the observations of youth workers and social workers who work every day for the inclusion of young people at risk of social marginalisation. The third gathers practical guidance on how to organise an inclusive intercultural initiative, with a checklist at the end.



Glossary

Some words come up again and again in the pages that follow. Here is a short glossary.

- **European Solidarity Corps:** a European Union programme that funds volunteering activities and solidarity projects for young people aged 18 to 30.
- **Volunteering team:** an international group of at least five people who volunteer together for a short period, from two weeks to two months.
- **Young people with fewer opportunities:** the term the programme uses for those who start at a disadvantage compared with their peers because of one or more obstacles. It describes a situation, not a person.
- **Hosting organisation and supporting organisation:** the first welcomes the group and runs the activity on site; the second prepares and accompanies the volunteer in their own country, before and after departure.
- **Group leader or accompanying person:** a person who lives with the group for the whole activity, coordinates it, encourages inclusive dynamics within it and acts as its point of reference.
- **On-arrival training:** the first structured meeting of the group on site, devoted to getting to know one another, clarifying rules and roles, and voicing fears and expectations.
- **Debriefing:** a moment when the group, after an activity or at the end of the day, stops to reflect on what it has done, what it has felt and what it has learnt.
- **Youthpass:** a European tool that documents the competences gained during a non-formal learning experience. It is both a certificate and a process of self-assessment.

The project



VEIL-CORPS in brief

The project "Volunteering experiences for inclusive learning: Community relief, protection and sustainability" (VEIL-CORPS), funded by the European Union under the European Solidarity Corps and coordinated by InformaGiovani APS ETS of Palermo, ran for twenty-four months, from November 2024 to October 2026. Its starting idea is that team volunteering in an international setting brings enrichment in two directions: those who receive the activity gain a concrete benefit, and those who carry it out grow in competences, confidence and sense of belonging. VEIL-CORPS wanted this mutual growth to reach above all those who usually remain outside experiences of European citizenship and mobility, and worked along two strands.

- **Social inclusion:** teams supporting youth centres, communities and services that work with young people in marginalised settings, such as summer schools, intercultural activities, sport, theatre and street art.
- **Environmental resilience:** teams devoted to preventing forest fires and hydrogeological instability, to supporting communities hit by a fire or a cyclone, and to promoting environmentally sustainable practices.

The twenty volunteering teams accounted for more than 200 mobilities. In more than a third of cases, the volunteers were young people with fewer opportunities. Their situations differed from one another: the most frequent were cultural, economic, social and geographical, as some of the volunteers came from Ukraine, currently a war zone.

Every team left a tangible mark: murals, public spaces restored after natural disasters, prevention work and green areas recovered after fires, paths and dry stone walls made safe again, almonds and olives harvested on land taken back from the mafia, summers of community activities in marginalised neighbourhoods. Other results cannot be seen, but they stay with those who lived these experiences, built in just a few weeks: more confidence in themselves and in their ability to take the initiative, a greater awareness of cultural diversity and of the need to overcome stereotypes and prejudice, and a stronger sense of European citizenship.

To find out more about the project, you can visit the [VEIL-CORPS project website](https://www.esc-veil.eu)



<https://www.esc-veil.eu>

What Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas are

It is a European Solidarity Corps action designed for large-scale, high-impact interventions. Every year the European Union identifies a number of shared challenges: in recent years, for example, these have included relief for people fleeing armed conflict or affected by natural or man-made disasters, positive learning experiences for young people with fewer opportunities, waste management and recycling, health and healthy lifestyles, the preservation of cultural heritage, and solidarity between generations.

Projects involve teams of at least five young people from at least two different countries, who carry out activities together for a community for between two weeks and two months. The programme also supports preparatory visits, which are especially useful when young people with fewer opportunities take part.

Leaving as a group, for a short time and with a concrete task, makes the format a way in for those who do not feel ready to go alone or cannot commit for long. VEIL-CORPS responded to two of the European priorities: offering positive learning experiences to young people with fewer opportunities, and supporting communities hit by natural disasters or exposed to the risk of them.

More information about the programme and about volunteering opportunities in the European Solidarity Corps is published on the [European Youth Portal](https://european-youth-portal.eu/).



https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en

Who carried it out

The partnership brought together twelve organisations from eight countries.

Organisation	Country
InformaGiovani APS ETS (coordinator)	Italy
Aventura Marão Clube	Portugal
Asociación La Rotllana	Spain
Asociación Las Niñas del Tul	Spain
De Amicitia	Spain
SCI Hellas	Greece
I Girasoli ETS	Italy
IBO Italia ODV ETS	Italy
MTÜ EstYES	Estonia
Solidarités Jeunesses	France
Internationale Begegnung in Gemeinschaftsdiensten	Germany
Union Forum	Ukraine

Where we volunteered

VEIL-CORPS ran twenty volunteering teams in two rounds, alongside coordination meetings between the partners. The first round, between June and November 2025, was preceded by preparatory visits to the places and organisations where the activities would take place. The second round took place between March and October 2026.

Dates	Activity	Where	Hosted by
6-21 June 2025	Street Art for Solidarity	Amarante (Portugal)	Aventura Marão Clube
19 June - 4 July 2025	Volunteering for nature maintenance	Voltri (Italy)	IBO Italia
4-19 July 2025	Social Community for "Estiu a la Plaça"	Badalona (Spain)	La Rotllana
13-28 July 2025	Summer school with children "Lestonnac"	Granada (Spain)	Las Niñas del Tul
15-30 July 2025	Support for children's leisure activities	Palermo (Italy)	InformaGiovani APS ETS
1-16 September 2025	Green Beats: Penáguila's Nature and Culture Revival	Penáguila (Spain)	De Amicitia
1-16 September 2025	A field of inclusion possibilities	Athens (Greece)	SCI Hellas
6-21 September 2025	Wildfire Prevention and Environmental Maintenance	Petralia Sottana and Palermo (Italy)	InformaGiovani APS ETS
19 September - 4 October 2025	Another World is possible	Amarante (Portugal)	Aventura Marão Clube
3-18 November 2025	Intercultural activities in a property confiscated from mafia	Caltanissetta (Italy)	I Girasoli ETS
16-31 March 2026	Street Art for Solidarity	Amarante (Portugal)	Aventura Marão Clube
28 June - 13 July 2026	Supporting summer activities with children	Sant'Agata di Militello (Italy)	InformaGiovani APS ETS
5-20 July 2026	Rebuilding Roccalumera: Community Support after Cyclone	Roccalumera (Italy)	InformaGiovani APS ETS
5-20 July 2026	Estiu a la Plaça	Badalona (Spain)	La Rotllana
12-27 July 2026	Summer school with children "La escolita"	Granada (Spain)	Las Niñas del Tul
13-28 July 2026	In action for land protection!	Levi (Italy)	IBO Italia
23 August - 7 September 2026	Almond Camp Mafia free Interculture in Confiscated Space	Caltanissetta (Italy)	I Girasoli ETS
23 August - 7 September 2026	Fair Play for All	Athens (Greece)	SCI Hellas
1-16 September 2026	Green Beats: Penáguila's Nature and Culture Revival	Penáguila (Spain)	De Amicitia
19 September - 4 October 2026	Another World Is Possible	Amarante (Portugal)	Aventura Marão Clube

The activities can be grouped into **two broad areas**, linked by a common thread: all of them directly involved young people with fewer opportunities, or were aimed at fragile or disadvantaged communities, and often both.

The first area is **socio-educational activities**. Many teams worked with children, teenagers and adults from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In Badalona, with La Rotllana, they supported "Estiu a la Plaça", a community event with shows, workshops, sport and music in the square, open to the whole neighbourhood. In Granada, with Las Niñas del Tul, they joined in the play activities for children and teenagers in the La Paz neighbourhood. In Athens, with SCI Hellas, they organised games and sports tournaments for children and young people from a disadvantaged neighbourhood. In Palermo, in summer 2025, they supported the youth centre of the San Giovanni Apostolo neighbourhood in its summer activities, and in 2026, in Sant'Agata di Militello, they supported play activities and food distribution. In Amarante, with Aventura Marão Clube, the medium was street art: in 2025 a mural on inclusion in a space for young children, enriched by the colours of the local children, and in 2026 another work, with play activities and meetings at a school.



The second area concerns **environmental sustainability**, fire prevention and recovery after natural disasters. In Penáguila, in the province of Alicante, the De Amicitia teams restored the Ruta Fitoclimática and the historic Jardín de Santos, which had been damaged by a fire. In Liguria, with IBO Italia, two teams looked after paths, firebreaks and dry stone walls, working on hydrogeological instability and environmental sustainability. In Sicily, in September 2025, one team supported fire prevention work in Petralia Sottana, in the Madonie Park, and in the Monte Pellegrino nature reserve in Palermo; in 2026 another team helped restore public spaces in Roccalumera, which had been hit by the cyclone that struck eastern Sicily in January 2026. In Amarante, in autumn 2025 and 2026, two more teams devoted themselves to sustainable agriculture. Finally, on the property confiscated from the mafia that I Girasoli ETS manages near Caltanissetta, in both years of the project, the volunteers took part in a sustainable farming experience combined with art, cooking and language workshops with the young migrants hosted by the association.



How we worked

The VEIL-CORPS method draws on the experience of InformaGiovani APS ETS and its partners in working with young people who find it harder to take part in these initiatives, for social or economic reasons, or because they know little about European opportunities.

Preparatory visits

The first working tool was the preparatory visits, in which project contacts and staff of the organisations involved took part.

Between March and early April 2025, a delegation from the partnership visited the activity sites: Portugal on 2 and 3 March, Italy from 11 to 15 March, Spain from 17 to 21 March, and Greece on 31 March and 1 April. The visits were used to check accommodation, workplaces and safety conditions, to define the programme and objectives of each activity, and to agree on the necessary adjustments.

Selection

The vacancies were published on the European Youth Portal and circulated by each partner. For some young people, however, an open call, even when promoted through official channels and those of the organisations, is not always the most effective way to learn about these opportunities. For those living in accommodation for asylum seekers, or supported by the services and community centres of their own neighbourhood, the organisations therefore promoted the activities directly in the local area: they contacted local organisations or offered the experience to young people they knew to be in a disadvantaged situation. The main selection criterion was motivation, not skills. Each application was discussed by the coordinating, hosting and supporting organisations, in order to present the activity to the person and understand their needs and any possible obstacles.

Preparation before departure

Each volunteer received information about the programme, insurance and Youthpass, an activity sheet, and guidance on how to live an intercultural experience. Each person had a contact to turn to with any question, who accompanied them through every aspect of the preparation, including the practical ones, such as choosing the route and buying tickets. An online meeting then allowed the group to get to know one another, to meet the person who would lead it, and to propose their own activities, so as to arrive with a role already in mind.

On site: from on-arrival training to the final evaluation

Each activity opened with on-arrival training: a game to get to know one another, practical information, roles, and the rules for living together, built as a group. It was also a chance to share fears, expectations and what each person thought they could give to the group; the answers were noted down so they could be revisited halfway through and at the end. The mid-term evaluation made it possible to check whether the activities were meeting everyone's expectations, how the group was doing and whether there were personal or collective difficulties, and so to make the necessary adjustments. The final evaluation was used to take stock with the participants and to support each person in reflecting on the competences and knowledge they had gained.

Recognising learning

Youthpass was introduced on arrival in a playful way, with particular attention to the key competences, and served as a reference point for supporting the individual assessment of competences. It was issued to everyone and, for those who found it useful, completed after returning home, with more help for those who needed it.

The role of the person leading the group

Each team had at least one group leader or accompanying person. The hosting organisations chose them from among their own staff and collaborators, from people with experience of intercultural groups and conflict management. The person leading the group lived with the volunteers and acted as a bridge with the contacts at the hosting organisation and with the local community. Their task was to follow each person closely and to encourage group cohesion, in particular the integration of young people with fewer opportunities. They also supported the moments of evaluation and reflection, both individual and in the group, and helped with language and communication between the group and the local community.

After returning home

After returning home, the volunteers kept in touch with their supporting organisation, in person or online, for a debriefing: a moment to look back on the experience, put a name to the competences gained and consider the next steps. This is an important stage, especially for young people with fewer opportunities.



Inclusion in European mobility: why it matters

European mobility opportunities are growing, but it is often the same people who take them up: those who already speak a foreign language, those whose family encourages them, those who know their way around portals and forms. A large share of young people does not even know that these opportunities exist.

Exclusion is a process

Exclusion is not a boundary between those inside and those outside, but a sum of disadvantages that reinforce one another: financial difficulty makes it harder to finish school, an interrupted education limits work, and the lack of work isolates. This is why inclusion is not a single gesture, but a set of choices at every stage: how an opportunity is made known, how people are selected, prepared and accompanied, and what happens afterwards.

Who young people with fewer opportunities are

The European Solidarity Corps identifies a number of obstacles that can put a young person at a disadvantage: disability; health problems, including mental health; obstacles linked to education; cultural differences; social obstacles, such as isolation or involvement with the justice system; economic obstacles; discrimination; geographical obstacles. This list is not meant to classify people, but to recognise barriers in order to reduce their impact. It is important to stress that recognising oneself in one or more items on the list describes a temporary situation, not a permanent characteristic of the person.

Personal obstacles and practical obstacles

Practical obstacles can be overcome with logistical and material support, while inner ones, linked to one's own insecurities and to a sense of not belonging, call for shared paths and a steady presence over time. These difficulties are often intertwined: covering a material cost achieves little if the person still feels inadequate.

Why team volunteering works

Team volunteering activities work because they are short, and therefore compatible with study, work or family responsibilities. Sharing the experience with other people makes the leap into something new less frightening. This type of activity also produces concrete, visible results. In terms of inclusion, in mixed groups nobody is there because they are disadvantaged, because the shared role shifts attention from what is missing to what can be done together.

Benefits for the organisation

An organisation that opens up to young people with difficult life stories learns to communicate more clearly, to plan more flexibly, and to build networks with schools, social services and associations: skills that improve all its activities.

To explore the subject further, you can read [the European Commission's implementation guidelines on the inclusion and diversity strategy](https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/documents-and-guidelines/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity-strategy).



<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/documents-and-guidelines/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-inclusion-and-diversity-strategy>

Voices from the field



In this part we have set out what was shared by the people who lived the volunteering teams from the inside, together with ideas and observations from practitioners, bodies and organisations working with young people on the ground. The testimonies that follow were gathered from four sources: interviews with the volunteers during the activities, and three questionnaires completed by group leaders, partner organisations and the juvenile justice social service. The testimonies do not claim to be a statistical sample; rather, they offer points of view and food for reflection and discussion.

The volunteers

The interviews were carried out in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, around five questions: what volunteering means, how working in a group helped them grow, which encounters with the local community left a mark or the most vivid memory, how their view of civic engagement and inclusion changed, and what message they would leave for those who have not yet had a similar experience.

Why volunteer abroad

The people interviewed often share the same motivations: testing themselves outside their comfort zone, curiosity about other cultures, and the wish to do something useful for the community. For many, it was their first volunteering experience abroad, and for some, their first ever.

"It is the first time I have volunteered abroad. It was a challenge, but I decided to try because I felt that this project would let me use my skills and make a difference in other countries."

"I started volunteering a year ago and I have not stopped since. I come from a poor, difficult neighbourhood, where as children we took part in social activities. Now I want to do my part too."

Some people chose to volunteer in their own country, and came away with a new view of places they thought they knew.

"I come from Italy, and I usually apply for projects abroad. This time I wanted to get to know the reality of my own country more closely. We work on land confiscated from the mafia, in the middle of the Sicilian countryside, and given the history of my country this matters enormously."

Growing in a group

Sharing a room, a kitchen and a working day with people from different countries and cultures is a test, but it gives a great deal back in terms of skills and self-knowledge.

"It helped me understand better who I am: what role I take in the group, how I fit in, how to work with people who come from different backgrounds. It made me very aware of my own position and of how my background influences the small actions of every day."

"I usually do things on my own. Sharing a room, dinner and the table with ten people for a few weeks taught me flexibility and openness, because everyone has their own way of doing things."

More than one person says they discovered leadership qualities they did not know they had, and the pleasure of taking the initiative, both in the work and in the daily life of the group.

Meeting the local community

The most intense memories come from genuine contact with the local communities: the welcome in small villages, traditions shared around a table, and spontaneous moments of celebration with young refugees. On these occasions, real understanding was built through gestures and closeness, well beyond spoken language.

"We did not have a language in common, but we found other ways to communicate, through games and dancing. It was a wonderful evening."

"I realised that even when you do small things, which perhaps do not mean much to you, people appreciate them. They were always kind, open, happy to see us."



Some interviews describe the encounters that struck people most deeply: the stories of the children of a neighbourhood marked by marginalisation, and the travel stories of those who came to Europe as migrants. These are the encounters that most challenged their initial prejudices.

"I learnt that we have a lot of prejudices about the areas where more migrants live. And that they are the very people who know how to take part in the neighbourhood and make it a better place, by doing things together. A small action can change a whole neighbourhood."

A different view of civic engagement

Many people say they have understood that they can play an active role in changes in society and in community life, and not just watch what others do. Civic engagement, they say, is not something for large organisations or for those with more resources, whether money or time: it can also be built on a small scale, with anyone, starting from the people close to you and the organisations in your own area.

"The experiences and emotions you live this way cannot be taught in any classroom. You have to live them. It is the only way to learn them."

"I come from a middle-class family and in everyday life I do not come into contact with marginalised groups: they do not go to my school, there is a separation. This experience gave me the chance to get close to people I would otherwise never have met."

A message for their peers

The last question asks them to leave a message promoting mobility and international volunteering, especially for those who are thinking of going but still have some doubts. The answers, in different words, come together in a single invitation: find the courage to take the first step, even when fear of the unknown seems to win.

"If you are afraid of doing something like this, do it without fear. It is a safe environment, and in the end you will thank yourself."

"To anyone in doubt I would say: take the step, do not be afraid. These places are full of people, of dreams, of ambitions, and they all want to get to know one another."

The people who lead the groups



The questionnaire for group leaders and accompanying persons gathered the experiences of people involved in activities with young people in disadvantaged situations: some led VEIL-CORPS teams, many work in youth centres and summer camps run by the partner organisations. Their experience ranges from a single time to more than forty.

Question	Average, from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)
How prepared did you feel the first time?	3.4
How difficult is it to encourage integration between young people with fewer opportunities and the rest of the group?	3.4
How important is interaction with the local community?	4.8
How far do you agree that an adapted way of communicating is needed?	3.9

The figures say three things. The first time, almost nobody feels fully ready. Encouraging integration is demanding work, but rarely impossible. And everyone who answered considers the relationship with the local community important or very important.

What drives people to become an accompanying person

Recurring themes are the wish to create spaces where everyone feels listened to, the conviction that the place where you grow up should not decide your opportunities, and the satisfaction of seeing a person change. Some answers come from people's own life stories.

"Coming from a background where I lacked role models, I know how much it matters to have people beside you who care about your well-being and understand your difficulties."

Preventing isolation

The answers sketch out a practical toolkit: work in pairs and in small groups, subgroups that change with every activity, informal one-to-one conversations, activities built around the person's interests, and a peer who acts as a buddy. One answer warns against turning inclusion into a procedure: nobody feels excluded when everyone in the group, including the person leading it, lives and works in the same way, under the same conditions.

"Isolation is often the first sign that someone is struggling. When people feel part of the group and know there is someone there for them, they share their difficulties early, and we can face them together before they become a crisis."

Managing conflict

The most frequently mentioned method has three stages: listen separately to the people involved, bring them together with a person who mediates, and check over the following days that the agreement holds. In intercultural groups, conflict often arises from different ways of communicating rather than from bad intentions. It is also better not to deal with sensitive issues in front of the whole group.

Communicating in an adapted way

Here opinions are divided. For many people it means speaking more slowly, using simple words, drawings, gestures and translations, and checking that the message has got through. Others fear that communicating too differently might make the person feel singled out.

"It is about simplifying the language, not out of paternalism, but to make communication easier."

When motivation drops

The first step mentioned is almost always a one-to-one conversation, calm and without judgement. From there, the answers suggest different solutions: reminding the person of the value of what they are doing, adjusting tasks and pace, allowing a break, and involving the supporting organisation or professional support. Sometimes, a few people point out, the most useful thing to offer is simply time and space.

The most common mistake

The answers point to two opposite tendencies: treating everyone in the same way without seeing their different needs, or treating those with fewer opportunities too differently and underestimating their abilities. In between lies a third mistake: confusing closeness with friendship and not setting clear boundaries from the start.

"The risk is assuming that a person with fewer opportunities knows or understands less. Everyone has strengths, and if you give them the chance to contribute as part of a team, they do."

The advice that one group leader gives to anyone taking on this role for the first time points in the same direction.

"Do not try to be perfect, try to be there. Listen more than you talk, and lead with empathy rather than with rigid rules. Remember that every young person in your group is capable, even when they do not believe it yet. And do not carry everything alone: ask for help and look after yourself too."

When you can see that something is changing

The moment when the impact is felt is almost always a quiet one: someone who proposes an activity without being asked, who solves a problem on their own, who helps a newcomer. One answer sums it up as a change of pronouns: when participants stop saying what you are doing and start saying what we are doing.

The organisations

The questionnaire for organisations covered their vision of inclusion, preparation, organisational barriers, cooperation between organisations and with social services, and what is missing at programme level.

Real inclusion, not just on paper

All the answers agree on one point: a project is truly inclusive when inclusion guides everyday choices and becomes part of the way of working, not when it remains a principle written into the funding application. It means reaching those who would not apply on their own, removing the obstacles of cost, language, transport and accessibility, involving young people in planning, training those who work with them, and checking that everyone has really taken part in and benefited from the experience.

"If only the most self-confident and experienced young people get through the selection, the project is not inclusive, whatever it claims."

"Inclusion does not mean treating everyone in the same way, but giving each person the support they need to take part on an equal footing."

"Start from the people, not from the project. Listen to their needs, respect their pace and build together an experience in which everyone feels welcome, safe and free to be themselves."

Preparation before departure

Almost all the organisations consider preparation decisive, giving it the highest score on a scale from 1 to 5. The practices recommended most often are additional meetings on expectations and meetings with people who have already volunteered; these are followed by meetings with families or social services and full logistical support, such as buying tickets directly.

Organisational barriers

The barriers mentioned most often are practical: documents that do not arrive in time, travel costs to be paid in advance, accommodation and workplaces that are not accessible to people with reduced mobility, and budgets that do not cover a support person. For participants from Ukraine there is also the war, which makes travel unpredictable and calls for particular attention to the well-being of those arriving from a conflict setting. Then there is the administrative workload, which is concentrated precisely at the times of selection and arrival. One answer points to a risk that every inclusive project should bear in mind: when time and energy run short, it is easier to be tempted to favour those who seem simpler to involve, at the expense of those who would benefit most from the experience.

Partnership and communication

The strength of the partnership between the sending and the hosting organisation weighs heavily on the success of the volunteering experience, for the person who goes and for the group. The key is regular, honest communication centred on the volunteer: clear roles and a contact person for each organisation before departure, information shared in good time and with the consent of the person concerned, and brief contacts even when everything is going well. Furthermore, volunteers should take an active part in the dialogue between organisations, and not merely be its subject.

Psychological well-being

Many volunteers do not disclose their difficulties out of shame or fear of exclusion; difficulties can also arise during the activity; and access to psychological support abroad is often slow and complicated. The burden then falls on the hosting organisation, which does not always have the tools to deal with it.

"Psychological well-being should be a structural part of quality volunteering, not a burden carried by individual organisations."

Telling the story without exposing people

The organisations agree that, when telling the story of these experiences, it is important to show what young people do and achieve, not their vulnerabilities. This is why they ask for informed consent, which can always be withdrawn, for every photograph and every video, and avoid sharing information about health, backgrounds or

personal difficulties. Whenever possible, they let the volunteers themselves tell the story of their experience, in their own words and images. In no case should a person be presented as a young person with fewer opportunities.

How success is measured

When assessing the success of an experience, the number of participants says very little. The organisations prefer to ask whether people felt safe, supported and part of the group, whether they gained self-confidence and new skills, and whether they go home with a clear idea of their next step. One of them relies on a simple but telling tool: the poster on which, during the on-arrival training, each person wrote down their fears. If, by the end of the activity, those fears no longer have a place on it, the personal experience can be considered a success.

The juvenile justice social service

The third questionnaire was completed by practitioners from a social services office for minors of the Italian Ministry of Justice, who have been working in that service for more than twenty-five years. Their answers concern young people in conflict with the law who take part in team volunteering activities as part of their individual pathway.

When a young person is ready

To understand whether a young person is ready to go, the social service looks first of all at their awareness of themselves and of the consequences of their behaviour, including responsibility for the offence. Next come the ability to fit into a mixed group and make a positive contribution, and a willingness to care for others and to open up to a new experience. For these young people, one of the answers stresses, volunteering should also have a restorative meaning.

Fears before leaving

The most common fear is not being up to the task. Many of these young people have never done volunteering activities for the community, and meeting people from backgrounds far removed from their own can be daunting. To support them, the social service offers preparatory meetings in a place they already know, together with the people who will run the activity and, when possible, peers who have already had the same experience.

The accompanying figure

All the answers consider it essential to have a reference person during the activity: someone able to combine strict rules with trust in each young person's abilities.

Preventing conflict

The starting point is knowledge. It is important to know in advance each person's strengths and vulnerabilities. Added to this are clear rules from the first day, applied consistently, and constant work on the group's identity: talking about one's own country and origins, with someone guiding mutual recognition, helps to build common ground.

What young people learn

According to the social service, international volunteering above all stimulates teamwork, listening, empathy, care for others and managing one's own emotions. The experience supports reintegration because it offers an environment that is complex and, at the same time, protected, in which every young person can discover their talents and test themselves.

"Some young people know challenge only as a clash with others. We want to teach them to challenge their own resistance and their own fears, so they can fully enjoy what life has to offer."

"Change happens first in the mind of the person who makes it possible. There are young people who have been surrounded by adults who never believed in them and never asked anything of them."

Three pieces of advice for those who host

- Listen and pay close attention to communication, both verbal and non-verbal.
- Keep a non-judgemental attitude.
- Look at the young person's abilities and aptitudes rather than their shortcomings, and help them to flourish.

Guidance for organisers



This part draws on the experience built up over the years and turns it into practical guidance for anyone who organises, or intends to organise, international volunteering activities: people working in a hosting or supporting organisation, or accompanying a group as a group leader. It is a set of suggestions to draw on freely, choosing what best suits your own context and the people you work with.

Before: reach out, select, prepare

Getting to know young people and building the network

Before planning, it helps to go where young people spend their time: schools, youth centres, sports grounds, neighbourhood services. It is worth finding out what interests them and what worries them, because an activity built around their real interests attracts more than any presentation of the programme. The most effective channel is the people they already trust, that is, educators, social workers, associations and reception centres. These relationships should be built before they are needed, with a contact person for each organisation.

Presenting the opportunity in a way people can understand

It is better to avoid acronyms and references to portals, and to choose simple words and concrete examples. More than anything else, the story of someone who has already been through it works best: this is why it is so valuable to involve volunteers from previous years in promotional meetings.

Selecting for motivation and forming mixed groups

- Ask for interest in the theme and willingness to live in a group, not specific skills.
- Add an interview, ideally with more than one organisation present, in which the hard parts are also described and needs and fears are asked about openly.
- For young people supported by a social service, leave the proposal to those who know them and share the decision with that service.
- Do not choose the people who are easiest to manage: it is the quickest way to undermine an inclusive project.
- Avoid groups made up mainly of young people with the same type of difficulty: the value of the experience lies in the encounter.

Removing practical obstacles

- Buy tickets directly for those who cannot pay costs in advance.
- Start the procedures for documents, visas and insurance straight away.
- Ask in advance about needs relating to food, accommodation, health and accessibility.
- Check accommodation and workplaces with a preparatory visit, and include an accompanying person in the budget.

Preparing the participants and those who lead them

It is important to organise at least one meeting on expectations, one with people who have already had a similar experience and, where needed, one with the family or the social service. In these meetings it is worth explaining what non-formal education is, talking about living together and cultural differences, and going through the journey in detail: for some it will be their first, and it is often more frightening than the activity itself. An online meeting of the group with the person who will lead it allows everyone to arrive with a role already in mind.

Group leaders should be people with experience of intercultural groups and conflict management. What they need to know about the group should be shared with them, with the consent of the people concerned; if it is their first experience, it is good to pair them with an experienced person who can always be reached.

During: the group, the volunteering, the community

Taking care of the first days and building the rules together

The first days set the tone for the whole activity. It helps to plan getting-to-know-you games and group-building activities that are accessible to all, with more movement and fewer words when there are language barriers, and to change the make-up of subgroups often. The non-negotiable rules, presented by the person leading the group, should be kept separate from the rules for living together, which the group builds itself; all of them should be written down, kept visible and applied consistently, starting with those who propose them. The person leading the group should make their own role clear from the start: they can be close to the group, but they are not a member like the others. During the on-arrival training it is worth having people share their fears, expectations and contributions, and coming back to that poster halfway through and at the end.

Communicating so that everyone understands

It means speaking without hurrying, with simple words and short sentences, helped by drawings, gestures and translation tools. After each instruction, it is useful to ask someone to repeat it in their own words. Communication should be adapted to needs, not to labels: those who struggle with English need simpler language, those with financial difficulties need free time that does not cost too much; with everyone else, you speak as you do with the rest of the group.

Preventing isolation and making room for reflection

- Watch the group at informal moments: meals, breaks, evenings.
- Suggest work in pairs and in small groups, and pair the most vulnerable people with a buddy, without announcing it in front of the group.
- Hold short one-to-one conversations even when everything seems to be going well.
- Plan short moments of reflection every day and a longer meeting every week, with methods that give a voice even to those who speak little: one word for the day, an image, a drawing.

Dealing early with conflict and drops in motivation

A conflict that is ignored tends to grow. It is best to listen first to the people involved separately, then help them meet once tempers have cooled, and check over the following days that the solution holds; sensitive issues should not be dealt with in front of the whole group. When motivation drops, it is good to have a private conversation straight away, try to understand where the difficulty comes from, and find a solution together. If someone wants to go home in the first few days, you can suggest waiting a day or two. If the difficulty is serious, it should not be handled alone: the supporting organisation and, when needed, professional support should be involved.

Opening the group to the local community

It is important to prepare both the group and the host community, to involve the group in local festivals and events, to offer free activities open to everyone, and to leave room for free time shared with the people who live there. And it is worth reminding the group that it does not come only to give, but also to learn and to receive.

After: evaluate, recognise, carry on

At the final evaluation, it is useful to ask whether people felt safe, supported and part of the group, what they learnt and how they dealt with difficulties, gathering the views of volunteers, group leaders, organisations and the local community; and to look honestly at what did not work. Each person should be supported in completing their Youthpass and helped to put the experience into words that are useful for a CV. To do this, [the Youthpass handbooks](#) can be used for inspiration.



<https://www.youthpass.eu/en/publications/handbooks/>

Finally, with the debriefing after returning home, you can help each person imagine their next step: another experience, a role as a group leader, a commitment in their own neighbourhood, a course of study or a job.

When telling the story of the experience, it is important to ask for informed consent that can be withdrawn for every photograph and video, to show what people do and not their vulnerabilities, never to identify anyone as a person with fewer opportunities and, when possible, to let the volunteers tell the story themselves.

A checklist for your first inclusive group

Tick each item once it is complete. When they have all been ticked, the volunteering team can set off on solid foundations.

Phase	To check	Done
Before the activity	Build a network with at least one service or organisation that works every day with the young people you want to involve.	
Before the activity	Present the opportunity in simple words and through the stories of people who have already been through it.	
Before the activity	Select for motivation, with an interview, asking openly about needs and fears.	
Before the activity	Form a mixed group in which no single type of difficulty prevails.	
Before the activity	Remove practical obstacles: travel, documents, food, accommodation, accessibility.	
Before the activity	Where needed, include an accompanying person in the budget.	
Before the activity	Visit the activity site, or have a reliable description of the accommodation and workplaces.	
Before the activity	Organise an online meeting of the group before departure.	
Before the activity	Make sure that the person leading the group is experienced, knows the participants and has a reference person to call.	
Before the activity	Agree with the partners on roles, contact people and ways of keeping in touch, including for emergencies.	
Before the activity	Prepare the local community for the arrival of the group.	
Before the activity	Prepare a consent form for photographs and videos that can be withdrawn.	
During the activity	Plan the on-arrival training, a mid-term evaluation and a final one.	
During the activity	Plan moments of reflection that are accessible even to those who speak little.	
After the activity	Plan the debriefing after returning home and help with Youthpass.	
After the activity	Think about what the next step could be for each person.	

Notes

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VEIL-CORPS project, number 101179670, ESC-SOLID-2024-VTHPA.

Year of publication: 2026.

Artificial intelligence tools were used in preparing this publication, for revising the text and for applying accessibility criteria. No text is published without prior human review.

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The photographs document the activities of the VEIL-CORPS project.

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Co-funded by
the European Union