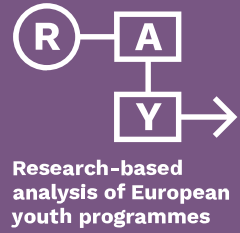


RAY- LEARN



Organisational trajectories of learning and development in the European youth programmes

2023
–
2024

**Key
findings**

*Summary of
the first phase
of multi-year
longitudinal
case studies*

December 2024



ORGANISATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMMES



RAY LEARN: KEY FINDINGS

WRITTEN BY

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DECEMBER 2024

COVERING THE FIRST PHASE OF MULTI-YEAR LONGITUDINAL
CASE STUDIES. A FULL RESEARCH REPORT WILL BE PUBLISHED
AFTER ALL CASE STUDY PHASES ARE COMPLETED.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 WHAT IS ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?

Organisational learning and development refers to the process through which youth work organisations become better adjusted to their context and more equipped to reach their mission and vision. For example, an organisation may be created with the mission to bring young people closer to policymaking. For this, the organisation must not only find a way to reach out to young people, but also a way to make and keep a name for itself, to gather expertise about youth policy, and to keep its members motivated and healthy, etc.

Organisational learning and development refers to all these processes that support the evolution and adaptation of an organisation and which are necessary to achieve the organisation's mission. Learning and development can happen when the organisation grows and caters to more young people, but also when the quality of its outputs increases, when it cements an identity and a way to operate, or when it expands its network and becomes better recognised.

1.2 WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?

Whether you are a youth worker trying to advocate for a specific minority of young people, create participation spaces, provide trainings, encourage peacebuilding or contribute to youth work in any other way, it is crucial to be aware of how your organisation learns and develops towards its mission. In doing so, you can plan strategically and fully understand how to make the most out of opportunities and structures such as the European Youth Programmes.

If you come from the policy implementation level – from a National Agency, a SALTO resource centre, etc. – this means that digging deeper into organisational learning and development will provide insights on how to better support beneficiaries and the European Youth Work Agenda from your position.

1.3 THE RAY LEARN PROJECT

RAY LEARN is a longitudinal research project that will follow the trajectories of a number of beneficiaries in nine countries across two years to study how they use the opportunities offered by the European Youth Programmes as a way to learn, develop, and expand their networks strategically. The qualitative part of the project includes a set of four focus groups over two years with each of forty-three participant beneficiary organisations in nine program countries. The quantitative part includes the analysis of organisational learning-related questions in the Ray Network's monitoring surveys. For more information about the monitoring surveys, please refer to RAY MON reports published in 2024.

In RAY LEARN we hope to put together detailed descriptions of how different kinds of beneficiaries interact with the programme when it comes to their organisational learning and development. The first round of focus groups is where we get to know the participant beneficiaries and explore their characteristics and history. In the second round we will use these findings to approach participants more systematically and compare their learning and development across relevant dimensions, such as organisation size or seniority. The third round will focus on organisational learning-specific strategies and support within the programmes, and the fourth round will focus on how to further the European Youth Work Agenda through organisational learning within the European Youth Programmes.

This short interim report summarises and synthesises the findings at the transnational level from the first round of focus groups and from the monitoring surveys. Beneficiaries' stories feed into this summary of their general development strategies, the challenges that they face in their learning and development, and their main resources when it comes to tackling those challenges.

2. ORGANISATIONAL GOALS AND STRATEGIES

2.1 MORE THAN HALF OF BENEFICIARIES HAVE A STRATEGY

62% of analysed case studies report having some sort of organisational development strategy. Only 10% explicitly said that they do not have a development strategy.

2.1.1 STRATEGIES CONSIST OF AGREEING ON PRIORITIES

Rather than being a detailed plan on how to proceed with their organisational development or with their creation of value in the near future, many of these explicit strategies consist of agreeing on priorities for the next time period, usually for the next three to five years.

2.1.2 STRATEGIES GUIDE DECISIONS

Once these priorities are set, they guide decisions on what projects to become involved in and what kinds of projects to design.

2.1.3 STRATEGIES NEED COHERENCE

Working with priorities in this way allows beneficiaries to develop a coherent value proposition.

2.1.4 STRATEGIES NEED FLEXIBILITY

At the same time, they can stay open and spontaneous for unforeseen funding opportunities that may arise in fields related to their goals.

2.1.5 STRATEGIES NEED TO BALANCE COHERENCE AND FLEXIBILITY

Beneficiaries often underlined the need to balance these two aspects of coherence and flexibility.

2.2 OPERATIONAL AND CONTENT PRIORITIES

When describing the priorities, or goals in their strategies, beneficiaries provided a mix of operational priorities and content priorities.

Operational priorities relate to the running and operation of the organisation, while content priorities relate to the content that the beneficiary wants to deliver.

Operational priorities form the basis of being able to reach content-related priorities and are the ones most closely related to organisational learning and development.

Below you can find a non-exhaustive list of key priorities that beneficiaries touched upon in both of these directions, each in alphabetical order with no hierarchy implied.

Operational priorities (related to organisational development)

Attracting new members
Becoming more visible
Delivering quality
Doing more youth-led youth work
Management of employees
Management of volunteers
Management of teams (staff and/or volunteers)
Making projects sustainable over time
Working on internal communication

Content-related priorities

Digital transformation and young people
Fostering recognition of youth work
Furthering youth policy
Inclusion of young people
Mental health of young people
Peacebuilding

3. NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

3.1 GATHERING AND MANAGING FUNDS

In the youth field, managing to operate with little or no structural funding is an ongoing challenge for most non-governmental organisations and networks. Their thematic directions are often heavily dictated by available funding opportunities. Many of them intentionally plan their strategies to “stay open for (funding) opportunities”, meaning open to adjust their thematic focus to varying degrees in order to secure funding.

“Financial instability is a significant threat to the functioning of the organisation”

FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT

Beneficiaries mentioned struggles predicting expenses and managing funds as well as dealing with project funding that does not come on time. These factors make it difficult to run and maintain projects for a longer period of time.

3.2 ATTRACTING PEOPLE

Attracting and keeping people involved is a key challenge for youth work. In youth work organisations, there is often a high fluctuation of young people, professionals, members, volunteers and stakeholders. Staying relevant and interesting for them over a long period of time is described as a key challenge. This makes it hard to build and keep knowledge and expertise over time.

3.3 HUMAN RESOURCE CHALLENGES

When describing what brought about difficulties in critical times for their organisations, beneficiaries very frequently mentioned not being able to afford sufficient workers or volunteers and not having enough time to tackle the workload of their projects. Staff turnover is also a common challenge to deal with, especially for volunteer-run organisations.

3.3.1 FINDING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

On top of struggling to attract and keep members, beneficiaries also reported difficulties in finding professionals or professionalising their workforce. At times, this was addressed at the organisational level, with beneficiaries seeking to learn from other organisations already implementing the practices they wished to adopt.

3.4 ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUREAUCRATIC DUTIES

The lack of human resources and the informal nature of many youth organisations and networks often leads to problems when dealing with complex administrative tasks such as application, hiring, and volunteer management procedures.

3.5 MANAGING GROWTH

Adequately managing a newly acquired building, learning to take care of a growing number of staff, or maintaining a mission and vision as the organisation or network grows also showed up as a common predicament.

3.6 INTERNALLY AGREEING ON DIRECTIONS AND GOALS

Large beneficiaries, such as networks, perform the constant task of maintaining a coherent identity and vision. Keeping up this task becomes a challenge when large disagreements between members arise or when the vision suddenly changes.

3.7 SPREADING OR RECORDING OPERATIONAL EXPERTISE

It was relatively common for respondent beneficiaries to experience a loss of operational expertise when key figures, such as the founder or secretary general, left the organisation, taking much of the institutional knowledge with them.

“The current managing director had to cut her maternity leave short to come back because she could not really be replaced”

FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT

This knowledge is often not formally recorded, and onboarding procedures are insufficiently detailed, making it very difficult for the organisation to stay resilient. This occurred in organisations of all sizes, and even those who had gone through the situation before found it difficult to record or spread the operational knowledge to prevent it from happening again. Safeguarding operational expertise is further complicated when organisations are run mostly by volunteers, because volunteer onboarding is a resource intensive task and volunteer turnover is usually high.

4. GENERAL RESOURCES

4.1 KNOWLEDGEABLE, MOTIVATED, SKILLED MEMBERS

Respondents shared that key persons within an organisation are resources in themselves. These are people such as founders, members with relevant expertise, those with a long tradition within the organisation (such as returning volunteers) or who are excited about what they do and thoroughly invest their skills, time, and energy to further the goals of the organisation, with relatively little focus on monetary rewards. Also, the young participants of their projects who decide to stay in the organisation and contribute to it.

“Many of these previous volunteers have become a central part of the organization in Sweden today”

FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT

4.2 NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

When facing a particular challenge or starting a new endeavour, organisations commonly learn best practices and borrow resources from one other. This often happens strategically; one of the key steps in setting a new focus or refining a specific process is to seek out other organisations that operate in the desired area, observing and partnering with them to learn.

“We consciously associated with other organisations working with vulnerable minorities, so we can learn from each other”

FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT

Moreover, ties with entities outside the youth work sector (such as academia, public administration, sports, arts, business, etc.) were frequently mentioned as valuable sources of opportunities, guidance, recognition and resources.

4.3 RECOGNITION

When a beneficiary or their work is recognised as bringing value and being of high quality, it lays the groundwork for building trust and interest among relevant stakeholders such as young people, schools, parents, grant providers, or policy-makers.

“While the monetary reward was much appreciated, the recognition from a university was considered even more significant.”

FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT

Participants shared stories where receiving official recognition opened the doors for them to become an important player in the field of youth and to obtain more attention and resources in the form of both financial support but also additional members or new spaces.

4.4 EXPERIENCE

Learning by doing is arguably the primary method of learning at the organisational level. Since most learning occurs informally and through experience, the more experience an organisation accumulates, the greater its expertise and know-how. Experience, here, may refer to that of the beneficiary’s members or that of the beneficiary itself. It could be general experience in the field of youth work or experience in specialised tasks, such as advocating for young people or applying for the European Youth Programmes. Over time, this experience contributes to the organisation’s know-how, allowing it to be meaningfully consolidated and applied.

4.5 HAVING A DEFINED NICHE

Beneficiaries whose activities revolve around a very specific topic, such as a particular sport, circus, music, etc., often find it easier to attract participants. They are more successful in gathering professional knowledge, as these organisations are often founded by professionals or people with advanced skills in the field. They also tend to have an easier time demonstrating their value and obtaining recognition as an important contributor to their niche topic. Conversely, for beneficiaries without a defined niche, finding one was an important milestone that helped them manage their work and elevate its quality.

5. SPECIFIC SUPPORT FROM THE PROGRAMMES

5.1 A SCHEME FOR NETWORKING AND PARTNERING

Most projects within the programmes involve partnering with at least one other organisation. This collaboration fosters learning together and from each other, not only in projects with a focus on organisational learning, innovation, and the spread of good practice, but also in mobilities and volunteering projects.

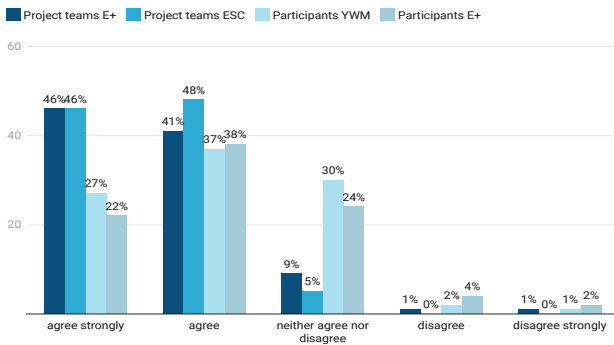
5.1.1 LEARNING BY DOING AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

Almost all project team members in the monitoring surveys reported that their last project had an impact on their organisation (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Participation in the project already had an impact on my organisation

Larger version in Section 8 at end

Project teams in Erasmus+ Youth, n = 3,846; project teams in the European Solidarity Corps, n = 504; project participants in Youth worker mobilities (Erasmus+ Youth), n = 4,439; and project participants in Erasmus+ Youth, n = 4,749.



5 point Likert scale question. Source: RAY Transnational Dataset (2024)

Project participants, however, were clearly more unsure about whether their project impacted their organisation or not (25% to 30% give a neutral answer to this question).

The fact that leaders reported a greater organisational impact than participants suggests that learning by doing at the organisational level (in this case by organising an exchange or volunteering project) is a significant driver of a project’s effect at this level.

Beneficiaries are able to learn by doing, rather than needing to be experts before trying new

methodologies, formats, or topics, because projects occur in partnership with other beneficiaries that can provide the expertise they may be lacking. The opportunity to collaborate with partner organisations makes it possible for them to contribute to organisational learning and development.

5.1.2 SUPPORTING EXISTING NETWORKS

Additionally, focus group respondents shared that mobility projects in themselves are sometimes used to enable transnational meetings necessary for the administration of transnational networks, meaning they are used to support and maintain interorganisational partnerships that already exist.

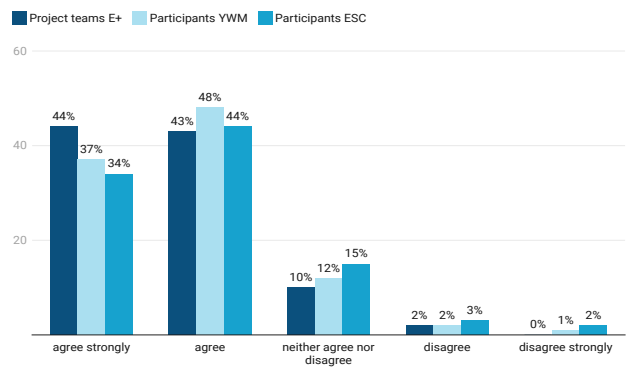
5.1.3 ENABLING INTERPERSONAL NETWORKING

At the individual level, monitoring survey data show how participation in the projects extends personal connections, with 90% or more of project leaders and project participants reporting that their networks extended meaningfully as a result of their participation in their last project (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 My networks have extended meaningfully as a result of the project

Larger version in Section 8 at end

Project teams in Erasmus+ Youth, n = 1937 of 3846; project participants of Youth worker mobilities (Erasmus+ Youth), n = 4439; and project participants in the European Solidarity Corps, n = 544.



5 point Likert scale question. Source: RAY Transnational Dataset (2024)

Interpersonal networking paves the way for interorganisational networking and resource exchange, as reported by participants in youth worker mobilities.¹

¹ As expressed in the monitoring survey’s open answer field, where participants in youth worker mobilities expressed what impact their participation in the project has had on their organisation.

5.2. MOTIVATION, ASSISTANCE, SKILLS

Volunteers, including those from the European Solidarity Corps, bring fresh motivation, inspiration, assistance, and skills to beneficiary organisations. Hosting volunteers helps to partially mitigate the challenge of limited human resources. This effect are most probably an important part of the impact at organisational level of volunteering projects reported by project teams (Figure 1). In addition, participants in youth worker mobilities also mentioned becoming more motivated in their roles after exchanging experiences with others in their projects.²

5.3 A DOOR TO NON-FORMAL YOUTH WORK

Several of the beneficiaries interviewed expressed the desire to develop a non-formal, youth-focused branch to reach young people with their work. Participation in the programmes enabled and guided this process, introducing them to non-formal methods and providing the space to carry them out. The programmes extend the reach of non-formal youth work to those who want to enter the field.

5.4 TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

The programmes provide training and capacity building opportunities at the individual level for young people, key persons in organisations and networks, and youth workers and volunteers. Under the right conditions, this capacity building also has an impact at the organisational level, as explained by participants in youth worker mobilities.²

5.5 APPEAL AND RECOGNITION

The European dimension makes activities more appealing for young people. In some cases, the European label elevates the status of the beneficiary in the eyes of local stakeholders, such as the local government, schools, and universities. This impact is tied to the structure of the programmes, which add significant value to youth work by supporting a participatory approach, for example. As discussed in section 4.3, recognition brings with it many forms of support.

5.6 A PUSH TO THINK STRATEGICALLY

The accreditation for Key Action One is an instrument within the programmes created to foster planning mobilities ahead of time and, therefore, the ability to engage with them more strategically. Obtaining the accreditation means having more security when it comes to knowing what projects will be granted support from the programmes. Focus group respondents reported that accreditation makes it easier to manage funds, to work on a project from very early on (as opposed to waiting to find out whether it has been granted funding) and to see how projects belong together, instead of conceiving them as isolated instances. It also provides stability for beneficiaries with smaller budgets who are greatly influenced by the programmes. This stability further enables strategic thinking.

5.6.1 LEARNING ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

More than half of the responding project leaders of Key Action One projects and participants in youth worker mobilities report having learned something about organisational learning and development as a result of their project. A higher proportion of project leaders (68%) reported learning as compared to participants in youth worker mobilities (55%). This suggests that learning by doing (that is, by leading a project) is also a significant driver of a project's impact, this time on a personal level.

² As expressed in the monitoring survey's open answer field, where participants in youth worker mobilities expressed what impact their participation in the project has had on their organisation.

6. PROGRAMME-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

6.1 SOME BENEFICIARIES BECOME HIGHLY DEPENDENT

In some national contexts, there are numerous beneficiaries whose organisational funding—and consequently organisational development in the sense of growth—relies heavily on the programmes. As a result, beneficiaries may become less resilient to changes in programme policy and more likely to align their priorities with those of the programme.

“The main need . . . is to become more autonomous from the dependence of the European Youth Programmes funds. Erasmus+ is 80% of funds they receive”

NATIONAL RAY-LEARN REPORT

This leaves less flexibility to address local, bottom-up needs or demands that fall outside the programme’s framework.

6.2 SMALL BENEFICIARIES CANNOT LIVE UP TO STANDARDS

Small and rural beneficiaries often struggle to measure up to standards for language, project management, or accreditation procedures for the programmes.

“The professionalization process of the association appeared to be a necessary condition for its development and the organisation of new Erasmus+ activities”

NATIONAL RAY-LEARN REPORT

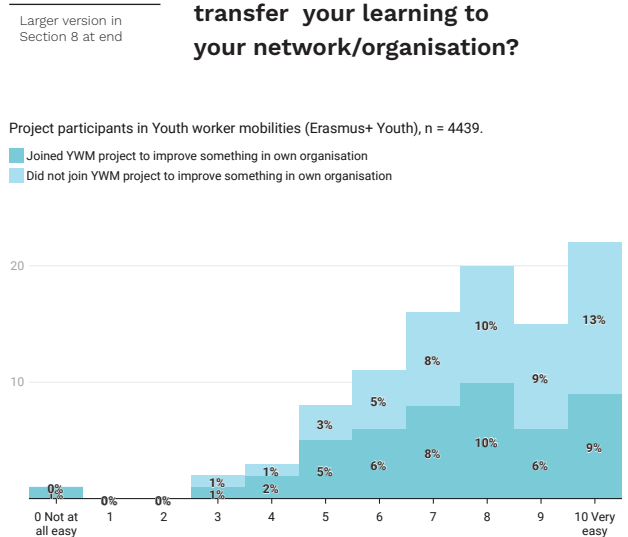
6.3 APPLICATION PROCESS IS OVERWHELMING

Understanding the logic of project and project management requirements is not straightforward, and this is a barrier to participation for beneficiaries. Even those who have learned through experience and understand the logic of the programmes often complain that the application process is convoluted and very resource intensive. Where available, participants greatly praised the support that they received from their National Agencies in this regard.

6.4 INDIVIDUAL LEARNING IS NOT REACHING ORGANISATIONS EFFICIENTLY

Most participants in youth worker mobilities rated the ease of transferring their learning to their organisation 5 or higher on a scale from 0 (not at all easy) to 10 (very easy) in the monitoring survey (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 **How easy was it for you to transfer your learning to your network/organisation?**



Yet the response pattern suggests that a sizeable percentage of respondents (41%) found at least some clear difficulty with it (rated 7 or less).

We also see that whether a person initially joined a project to improve something in their organisation or not seems to make little to no difference for the perceived ease of learning transfer.

And we see a pattern where participants in youth worker mobilities less often report their activity having an impact on their organisation when compared to project teams (see Figure 1 and section 5.6.1).

Taken together, these responses point to the conclusion that the experience of working with partners on a project and learning by doing at the organisational level are more impactful avenues for learning and development at the organisational level than trainings or mobilities for individuals.

Nevertheless, trainings and mobilities are not ineffective in themselves and have a role to play.

7. SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The first round of case studies showed that many beneficiaries of the European Youth Programmes have a learning and development strategy and that when present, these strategies consist of setting thematic goals intended to guide the creation and selection of projects for the next three to five years.

The main challenges faced by beneficiaries when it comes to their learning and development have to do with gathering and managing funds, professionalising, staying attractive to young people, potential members and other stakeholders, and managing administrative tasks in a context where much of the work they do is informal (and thus operational knowledge not formally recorded). Their resources to face these challenges are working in partnership with other organisations and learning from them; having veteran, skilled members; gathering experience as an organisation; obtaining official recognition, and growing their work in a specific niche.

In this context, **the European Youth Programmes support organisational learning and development** by providing a structure for networking and partnering in different projects. They also provide opportunities for training and capacity building. However, the largest impact at the organisational level seems to be cultivated through partnering and project management (learning from experience), with youth worker mobilities showing a smaller impact at this level in comparison.

In addition to providing opportunities for networking and capacity building, **international youth work adds an extra layer of appeal**, helping to attract young people and motivate youth workers. It is also often recognised as a mark of quality. Lastly, some beneficiaries shared how the European Youth Programmes served as a framework for adding a youth branch to their organisation, showing that the programmes have the potential to bring established enterprises closer to the field of youth.

The most common organisational learning-related challenges specific to the context of the programmes include beneficiaries becoming overly dependent on programme funding, struggling with the application process and the meeting language, project management, and accreditation standards. Although less prominent, it is also worth noting that the knowledge individuals gain, for example, through youth worker mobilities, is not always easily transferred to their organisations. Interestingly, whether participants joined a project specifically to improve something within their organisation does not seem to influence this outcome.

These round one findings on the resources and challenges related to organisational learning and development in the context of the European Youth Programmes are the first step toward understanding the realities of beneficiaries and providing support. The immediate next step is round two, where we will build on these findings to compare how characteristics such as the seniority, the size, or the funding scheme of a beneficiary make a difference. We will also begin tracking how different beneficiaries evolve over time in terms of their organisational learning and development aspirations, achievements, and strategies. This will open the door to start **discussions on how to tailor support within the programmes** in order to better reach different beneficiaries and, in turn, nurture and support the European field of youth in line with the European Youth Work Agenda.

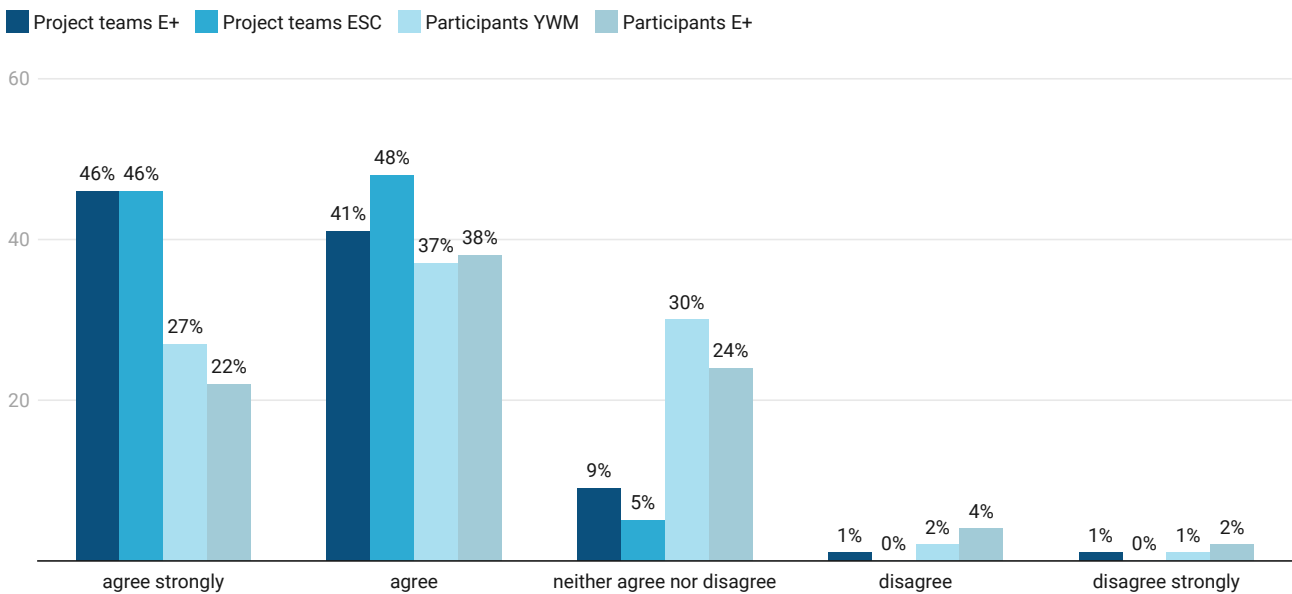
8. FIGURES IN LARGER RESOLUTION

8.1 FIGURE 1: PARTICIPATION IN THE PROJECT ALREADY HAD AN IMPACT ON MY ORGANISATION

Figure on Datawrapper: https://www.datawrapper.de/_/G3EvN/?v=3

Figure 1. Participation in the project already had an impact on my organisation

Project teams in Erasmus+ Youth, n = 3.846; project teams in the European Solidarity Corps, n = 504; project participants in Youth worker mobilities (Erasmus+ Youth), n = 4.439; and project participants in Erasmus+ Youth, n = 4.749.



5 point Likert scale question.

Source: RAY Transnational Dataset (2024)

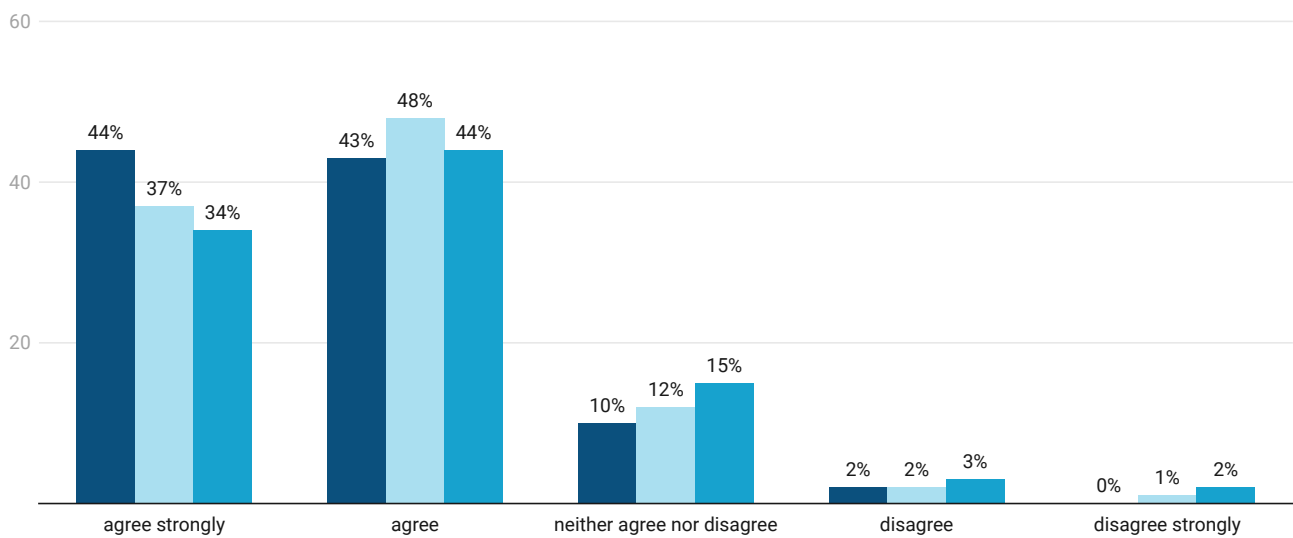
8.2 FIGURE 2: MY NETWORKS HAVE EXTENDED MEANINGFULLY AS A RESULT OF THE PROJECT

Figure on Datawrapper: https://www.datawrapper.de/_/TimW1/?v=2

Figure 2. My networks have extended meaningfully as a result of the project

Project teams in Erasmus+ Youth, n = 1937 of 3846; project participants of Youth worker mobilities (Erasmus+ Youth), n = 4439; and project participants in the European Solidarity Corps, n = 544.

■ Project teams E+ ■ Participants YWM ■ Participants ESC



5 point Likert scale question.

Source: RAY Transnational Dataset (2024)

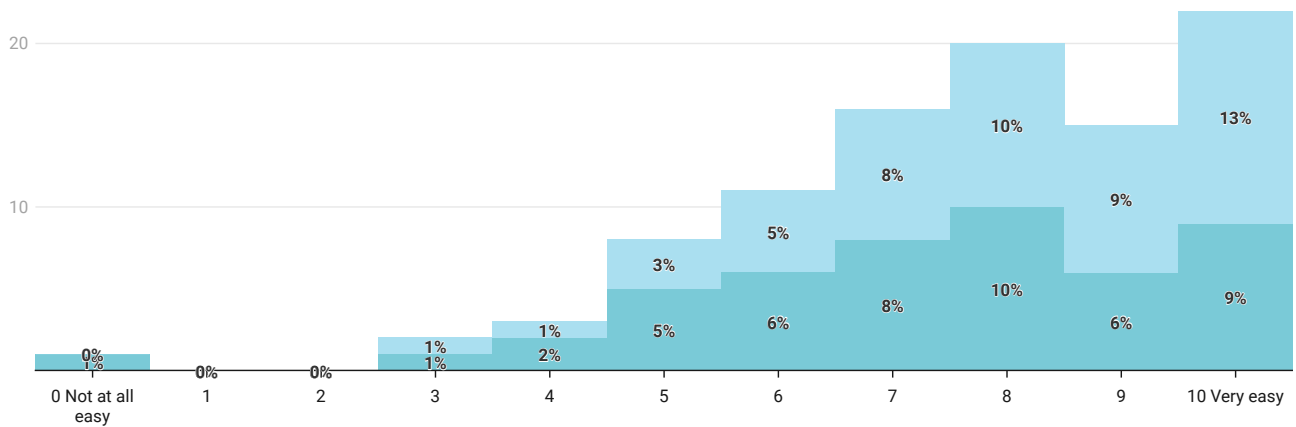
8.3 FIGURE 3: HOW EASY WAS IT FOR YOU TO TRANSFER YOUR LEARNING TO YOUR NETWORK/ORGANISATION?

Figure on Datawrapper: https://www.datawrapper.de/_/DY41A/?v=3

Figure 3. How easy was it for you to transfer your learning to your network/organisation?

Project participants in Youth worker mobilities (Erasmus+ Youth), n = 4439.

- Joined YWM project to improve something in own organisation
- Did not join YWM project to improve something in own organisation



11 point scaling question, slider with integer interval stops from 0 to 10.

Source: RAY Transnational Dataset (2024)

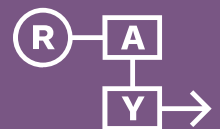
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