Research analysis of civil society organisations challenges and responses to tackle loneliness, isolation and social exclusion of youth

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

1.1. PROJECT SUMMARY

The STOP LONELINESS START VOLUNTEERING (SLSV) project was developed as a response to the increasing hardship caused by isolation and loneliness experienced by youths across Europe.
Volunteering offers at the very least a partial solution to this problem. This theory is upheld by the project partners' own observations as well as research available in the public domain.
All partners work within the field of inclusive volunteering as well as youth volunteering and youth work for those with fewer opportunities.

Pandemic related measures caused much hardship for everyone across Europe, but particularly so for young people. Many were deprived of their normal schooling and social life and have had to face sickness and, sometimes the death of family members. Young people were also expected to demonstrate solidarity with the rest of society and make sacrifices for the benefit of those most vulnerable. However, at this time, little attention was paid by society to the possible consequences the young themselves might experience. The situation was then, and is now, especially challenging for youths living in difficult conditions before the pandemic such as those from poor families, or living in a violent environment, and those who may have less opportunities in life due to their own personal circumstance.

The main aim of the SLSV project is to raise awareness about how volunteering can potentially be used, not only as a means of preventing and alleviating social isolation of young people, but also as a way to provide empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers.
We aim to show and transfer innovative and effective practices, (including digital volunteering) that could encourage youths, (particularly those with fewer opportunities), to get involved in volunteering. We hope to discover what young people need to start volunteering and what support they require from volunteering organisations, their local communities and national and EU programmes and policies.

The following activities will be undertaken for the SLSV project:

1) Research of existing practices in all partner countries, as well as some other European countries, in the field of youth volunteering and how this prevents loneliness and isolation. Findings will be presented in the 'Research and Analysis of Challenges and Responses of Volunteering Organisations'.

2) Project partners will seek out examples of best practice in the prevention of loneliness through volunteering in their own and other European countries and recognize the potential of these innovative practices that might transfer positively into other areas. Interviews and personal interest stories will be filmed and recorded with volunteers, beneficiaries and representatives of volunteer organisations such as volunteer mentors or managers. Selected examples will be included in a 'Best Practices Compendium' and accompanied by a video featuring the personal experiences of volunteers.

3) Current challenges and the needs required for preventing loneliness and encouraging youth volunteering will be sought after and researched. Using the World Café method, we will hear the experience of stakeholders such as young people, youth mentors, youth leaders and decision-makers, in order to help develop the future

potential of volunteering for young people as well as establishing a dialogue among stakeholders. These findings will be presented in an on-line campaign 'The Voice of the Youth'.

4) The project will examine the role of volunteer centres and other networks in preventing loneliness among youths and research the potential for further action that may benefit young volunteers and other youths, especially those with fewer opportunities. The result will be presented in the 'Guidelines for Volunteer Centres and Networks'.

5) The project aims to improve the quality of inclusion and mentorship for young volunteers by providing volunteer organisations with the necessary skills for the successful involvement of volunteers in preventing the loneliness and isolation of youths. A theoretical framework and tools for working with young volunteers and youth organisations will be created and the results will be presented in the 'Guide for Volunteer Organisations'.

6) All the above activities will serve as a basis for advocacy actions, resulting in the 'European framework for combating loneliness, isolation and exclusion of the youth', a policy paper which will be sent to decision-makers and other key stakeholders on local, national, regional and EU levels.

7) There will also be 6 partner meetings in all partner countries and 4 multiplying events. The results will be presented in an interactive and participatory way with the aim to establish new connections and encourage communication among organisations in the field. Simultaneously, all partner organisations will ensure dissemination and promotion of project results via their webpages, social media and information sharing within their usual activities such as training, events, conferences, mailing lists etc.

1.2. ABOUT THE PARTNERS

SLOVENE PHILANTHROPY

Slovene Philanthropy, Association for the promotion of voluntary work, is an independent, non-governmental, non-political, non-profit, humanitarian organisation working in the public interest since 1992. Its programmes are aimed at improving the quality of life in the community and advocating for the vulnerable groups in society. Slovene Philanthropy's central activity is the promotion of volunteering, stemming from the belief that through volunteering we can all contribute to a better and more tolerant society, based on respect towards everyone, no matter their personal or objective circumstances.

The organisation offers training for volunteers, mentors and organisers of volunteers, and educational content for various stakeholders. Its values are: Solidarity, Respect towards People and Nature, Tolerance, Equality and Equal Opportunities for All. The organisation groups its various activities into Programme Units. Slovene Philanthropy believes that we are all responsible for the life of our community and it wants everyone to be aware of this, so its work is focused on awareness raising, information, advocacy and networking. Programmes deal with areas that are not yet covered or not covered sufficiently by state institutions but can be significantly improved by the additional involvement of people - volunteers. These areas are: Helping refugees, the homeless and other people without health insurance by providing health services, advocating for migrant workers' rights, building intergenerational cooperation, etc.

Unfortunately, with the increasing stratification of society, there are more and more areas where people's participation is crucial to ensuring the values of a fair and just society. Slovene Philanthropy's vision is a kind and secure society that offers a safe environment to all, even for those who are, for any reason, unable to provide a comfortable existence for themselves and their families. This will be achieved through true partnership and cooperation of national institutions, the economic sector and voluntary activities of citizens.

Slovene Philanthropy supports people's initiatives that are in line with the values it represents. The organisation also uses its projects to transfer good practice to developing countries. For 30 years, Slovene Philanthropy has been actively responding to social problems, encouraging and developing volunteer work and intergenerational cooperation while acting in the area of migration, helping the vulnerable and being a vocal advocate of human rights.

Website: https://www.filantropija.org/

VOLUNTEER IRELAND

Volunteer Ireland is the national volunteer development organisation and a support body for all local Volunteer Centres in Ireland. We work to support, promote and celebrate volunteering. We do this in many different ways, working with a variety of stakeholders.

We promote and celebrate volunteering in Ireland through campaigns such as National Volunteering Week and the Volunteer Ireland Awards. Along with Volunteer Centres across the country, we manage I-VOL (the national database of Irish volunteering opportunities). We also support national volunteer involving organisations by offering bespoke training, consultancy and an extensive range of online guides and resources on engaging volunteers as well as supporting large scale corporate volunteering projects and work with both companies and organisations to develop their corporate volunteering programmes.

There are 29 Volunteer Centre across the country who work with Volunteer Ireland. Volunteer Ireland develops and supports best practice in volunteering and Volunteer Centres, including the evaluation of Volunteer Centres according to a quality standard framework.

Website: https://www.volunteer.ie/

VOLUNTEER CENTRE AND SELF-HELP DENMARK (FriSe)

FriSe is the national umbrella organisation for 69 local volunteer centres and 10 self-help organisations across all of Denmark. We are independent of government, party political and religious interests. Together with our members and a large number of collaboration partners nationally and internationally, we are concerned with developing local volunteering and strengthening the local communities, so that everyone has the opportunity to volunteer and find help and support in the voluntary communities. FriSe works to support, develop and promote volunteering and to improve the framework and conditions for volunteer organisations. We work to promote and support volunteering and our members through:

· Knowledge building & knowledge sharing
· Capacity building & consultancy
· Partnerships and networking with key stakeholders across all sectors

- · Visibility & dissemination of social volunteer work
- · Interest Safeguarding & advocacy

In addition, we run a number of projects and initiatives, all of which aim to make it easier to become and be a volunteer and easier to be a voluntary association. For example, we operate Denmark's largest job portal Frivilligjob.dk where volunteers can find a volunteer job amongst the many different organisations, and we provide digital solutions for associations via TechSoup as a part of the TechSoup Global Network. TechSoup runs a donation program, which provides eligible organisations with donated and discounted software. We are also the coordinator of the national celebration of volunteerism; Volunteer Friday and are responsible for the national distribution of Socialkompas.dk, a database where people can find help and support amongst organisations in the community.

Website: https://www.frise.dk/

DKOLEKTIV – ORGANISATION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

DKolektiv is a social development organisation built on the 15 years' experience of the Volunteer Centre Osijek in the fields of development of volunteering, civil society and democratic culture.

DKolektiv is established on the principles of solidarity, humanity, respect for diversity, non-violence, tolerance, understanding, responsibility and cooperation. The organisation is socially sensitive and actively encourages dialogue and cooperation. They protect human dignity and human rights whilst contributing to solidarity and social cohesion. DKolektiv actively listens and argues for sustainable development and a humane, open and democratic society.

The organisation's mission is to inspire and support democratic culture, the development of civil society and volunteerism, the creation of equal opportunities and active participation of citizens.

DKolektiv wants to contribute to the development of, democratic culture, active citizenship, the development of volunteerism, a strong and progressive civil society, good governance, an inclusive society and a better position for minority, vulnerable and marginalised groups. DKolektiv is characterised by independence of action and open presence, the exchange of knowledge and capacities, openness to different opinions and attitudes and sharing knowledge and expertise in the field of activity.

DKolektiv cooperates with civil society organisations and initiatives, citizens, public institutions, public and private institutions, media, the economy as well as European and international organisations.
Special attention is given to the creation of targeted and sustainable interventions through projects and programmes that are implemented in cooperation with other organisations and work collaboratively. DKolektiv strives to be innovative in our actions, to promote positive changes, create opportunities for learning and development, foster dialogue and create connections between people, organisations and communities.

Website: https://www.dkolektiv.hr/public/hr

CEV - CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN VOLUNTEERING

The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), previously the European Volunteer Centre, was established in 1992. It is a European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion and support of volunteers and volunteering in Europe at the European, national or regional level.

Through our network, we aim to be the leading voice in the values-based volunteering debate in Europe. We aim to influence and share current trends and challenges and those predicted for the future. We develop and provide policy advice and expertise for European policymakers so that volunteering policies and programmes developed at European level are effective and fit for purpose.

Network members are supported to further their own objectives at national, regional and European level by protecting and supporting a free and enabling civil society space, by advocating for suitable European funding support, and by developing supportive policy statements on pertinent volunteering issues at the European level. In this way, we are reaching out to the many thousands of volunteers and volunteer organisations in Europe as a source of support by bringing the European dimension to their work.

CEV channels the collective priorities and concerns of its member organisations to the institutions of the European Union and the Council of Europe. Together with other stakeholders, we exchange policies, practices and information in order to reach the outcomes envisaged in the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030).

CEV's vision is a Europe in which volunteers are central in building a cohesive, sustainable and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. CEV is a European network of organisations dedicated to the promotion and support of volunteers and volunteering; its mission consists of providing collaborative leadership to create an enabling environment for volunteering in Europe.

Website: https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/

e.p.a. - european playwork association

e.p.a. is an independent, International Youth NGO based in Hamburg – a register association (e.V.). e.p.a. is recognized and supported by the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, the EU and EACEA in Bruxelles. e.p.a. has been active within a network of partners in 40 countries over 4 continents, involved in Youth Exchanges, Training Courses, Seminars and Voluntary Service, all within the values of: Participation, Citizenship, Democracy, Human Rights, 'Inclusion' and Youth Empowerment in the spirit of, 'All different all equal'.

e.p.a. in Hamburg is a eurodesk.eu partner for the region, who, through its affiliate 'Europa JUGEND Büro', provides youth information and dissemination services and gives advice to Youth groups and schools in Hamburg, and the wider region on European youth mobility.

e.p.a. in Hamburg coordinates the international e.p.a. network. It has another main office in Liverpool. Both are independent legal entities, who are 'sister' organisations holding the same aims, objectives and vision. Young

people over the years have participated in many Youth Exchanges including Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, South America and West Africa.

e.p.a. works especially with young people with fewer opportunities (labelled 'Neets', young migrant and refugees) from disadvantaged communities by creating access to non-formal learning and supporting European youth projects. Our partners include; youth initiatives, youth and community centres, adventure playgrounds, orphanages, residential centres and youth rights and citizens associations.

The e.p.a. logo is a rainbow which is incorporated into all e.p.a. activities in beautiful ways as a sign of hope and of the differences that complete each other in their diversity. If you take a colour out, it is no longer a rainbow!

Website: www.go-epa.org

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS OF CSO CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

2.1. ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In an increasingly individualised society, loneliness and isolation among young people has become a growing problem, which the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated.

The situation that has lasted for over two years brought changes in lifestyle, schooling, limitations in socialisation, and the loss of loved ones. It has left many consequences, especially among youths with fewer opportunities, who are now at greater risk of experiencing exclusion and marginalisation. In some cases, this group of young people were unable to attend school, to socialise in a safe environment and were left without a daily warm meal.

Loneliness and isolation can lead to social exclusion and severe distress in young people. In order to help combat this, civil society plays an extremely important role. We need to go beyond local and national efforts and instead promote transnational dialogue and knowledge exchange. To recognize loneliness and isolation as a source of distress in young people is not enough. In order to combat it, sufficient resources must be allocated to address the consequences and to acquire the appropriate knowledge in order to do so.

The social changes that the COVID-19 crisis has brought, should not be underestimated. We need to build connected societies and break down the barriers that make some young people excluded, isolated, and lonely. Volunteering and quality volunteering programs can play a key role in supporting young people that face loneliness or poor living conditions.

This research has been designed to help develop and establish quality-volunteering programs that are geared towards combating the isolation of young people.

The purpose of this research was to explore:

- The extent that existing EU and national policies and practices in partner countries embrace the process of volunteering, support it and see it as a possible solution in the fight against loneliness, isolation, and exclusion of young people
- The role of volunteers and Civil Society organisations
- The role of volunteer centres, youth organisations, and other volunteering organisations and communities in Europe
- Relevant statistics to measure the level of loneliness, and isolation among young people.
The final analysis of this research:

- Provides a better understanding of the effects that EU policies and programs have in the non-governmental and volunteering sector within partner countries that are focused on combating loneliness and isolation among young people. Particular emphasis was placed on those aimed at reducing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Identifies trends, similarities, differences, opportunities, and challenges based on which, it is possible to identify future strategies and activities that could be implemented more effectively on a national and EU level.

- Establishes support to Civil Society organisations with the possibility of developing actions, strategies, and volunteering programs that are focused on combating loneliness, isolation, and social exclusion of young people.
- Raises awareness of the benefits of volunteering as a means of combating loneliness, isolation, and exclusion.

This publication includes:

- An introduction including a project description, relevant information on partners, the purpose, objectives, and research methodology.
- A review of policies, legislative framework and practices in partner countries, and on the EU level.
- Challenges and response opportunities for Civil Society organisations and volunteers.
- The role and the influence of volunteer centres, youth organisations, and other volunteer organisational networks.
- Conclusions and recommendations.

2.2. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The research used the following methodology:

1. Desk research including an analysis of national policies, legislative and institutional frameworks that support civil society and volunteering to combat loneliness, isolation, and exclusion from the European countries of Croatia, Slovenia, Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Bulgaria, Portugal, France, Italy and Spain.
Policy analysis, legislative and institutional framework analysis on the EU level was completed by CEV.

2. An online questionnaire for volunteering organisations and those that include volunteers through which partners researched the capacities of organisations to develop quality volunteer programs to combat loneliness, isolation, and exclusion of youth. The questions revolved around the positive and negative effects of policies and legislative frameworks that are already in place. Questions also related to the knowledge, skills, experiences, cooperation and support that the organisations have on the local and national level as well as questions regarding the support networks and professional support organisations may have. Lastly, the questionnaire focused on the level and type of support the organisations would need to be able to establish sustainable volunteer programs. Partners collected 231 questionnaires in total, 18 from Denmark, 54 from Croatia, 37 from Ireland, 23 from Germany and 99 from Slovenia.

CEV also conducted two interviews with EU networks in Brussels that are active in the field of youth, specifically in the field of loneliness, isolation, and exclusion of youth. These networks were, 'Loneliness Europe' and 'Eurodesk Brussels Link'.

3. Analysis and interpretation of the data and results and preparation of the publication.

3. REVIEW OF EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL POLICIES, LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICES

3.1. EUROPEAN POLICIES AND EU LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH VOLUNTEERING

As the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) has written before,[1] there is a lack of an EU-wide legal framework for volunteering. Member states have their own distinct legal framework, with these frameworks identified in detail in the CEV's 'Volunteering Infrastructure in Europe' publication.[2]

Each member state uses its own definition of 'volunteering', a definition that is usually influenced by its social, economic, cultural and political background.[3] For some member states, these are legal definitions used to clarify the legal status of volunteering in order to protect and support both volunteers and voluntary organisations.[4] While all member states have a definition of 'volunteering',[5] the majority of them do not have a legal definition.[6] In these states volunteering and volunteers are regulated by general laws that apply to all citizens such as employment, youth, residency and mobility laws.[7]

While differences exist between member states, there are also some common features in how they define volunteering, allowing us to understand the EU-wide legal framework. All member states define volunteering as activity that is conducted out of free will, developed in the framework of non-profit, non-governmental organisations, non-professional, unpaid and carried out for the benefit of the community or a third party.[8]

EU institutions have adopted these elements in the definitions of volunteering that they use. For example, the EU Commission in the 2011 communication on 'EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU', defined volunteering as; 'unpaid work that is conducted out of free will and for the benefit of the community'.[9] If an activity involves these elements it is recognised as volunteering across the EU, and the individual participating is recognised as a volunteer, and is regulated as such.[10]

While there are these common definitional features, it is important to keep in mind that the way member states regulate volunteering differs for all. For member states that have a legal definition and framework, there are a variety of laws that regulate various aspects of volunteering such as pensions, subsidies, state benefits, reimbursement of expenses, liability and insurance obligations, with each state conducting themselves differently.[11] Similarly, these member states differ with how they regulate voluntary organisations, such as the

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[1] Centre for European Volunteering, 2020, 'Volunteering in Events Toolkit', p.2,
https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_f6fe501a4dc146ffb4c5c135bb3a10af.pdf

[2] Centre for European Volunteering, 'Volunteering Infrastructure in Europe', https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/vie

[3] Educational, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency, Directorate General Education and Culture, 2010, 'Volunteering in the European Union', pp.51-54, 111, https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1018_en.pdf

[4] Ibid, 112

[5] Centre for, 'Volunteering Infrastructure.'

[6] Educational, Audiovisual & Culture, 'Volunteering in', 55.

[7] Ibid, 113

[8] Ibid, 55

[9] European Commission, 2011, 'EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU', p.2, https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1311_en.pdf

[10] Educational, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency, Directorate General Education and Culture, 'Volunteering in', 55

[11] Ibid, 112

setting of rules on organisations' responsibilities for social security and collective insurance contributions.[12] Also, as mentioned previously, some member states have no legal framework and thus use differing general laws to regulate volunteering.[13]

EU Policies Tackling Loneliness, Isolation and Exclusion of Youth

The most current relevant EU policy to support our research is that completed for and based on, the European Solidarity Corps programme.[14]
The European Solidarity Corps is an EU funded programme that provides volunteering opportunities to 18-30 year olds (and 18-35 years old in the Humanitarian Strand of the programme), living in the EU or in one of the programme's partner countries. These volunteering opportunities have travel, food, accommodation and insurance costs fully covered.

A key aim of the European Solidarity Corps is to expand on Erasmus +'s work of encouraging young people to travel and explore new cultures. Since this programme involves young people engaging and interacting with a larger number of people and places, the programme can also be seen as a tool to help reduce social isolation among young people. By covering the various costs for volunteers, the programme is able to further minimise loneliness by making volunteering more financially accessible for young people who may have fewer opportunities.
The EU also currently has a policy of researching loneliness and social isolation which has been completed using the following two methods. Firstly, the European Commission's joint research centre conducts analysis on the extent and impact of loneliness and how it may be combatted .[15] Secondly, the EU exchanges evidence with partners such as Japan on the importance of connecting with people when tackling loneliness as well as exchanging policies that can be used to minimise social isolation.

As the EU is in the process of researching loneliness, there is currently a lack of implemented EU policies in place on the issue. Some member states have already implemented various policies, however significant differences exist between them. For instance, some policy measures take a sector specific approach, whilst some take a more complex, macro level approach, whilst others still are bottom-up and some are top-down.[16] Like with the member states' legal frameworks for volunteering, there is no one size fits all approach with differing policy approaches to tackling loneliness based on the national context.[17]

Relevant EU-wide Research

Research conducted by the Commission's Joint Research Centre shows that loneliness has spiked across the EU in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, 12% of EU citizens felt lonely more than half the

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[12] Ibid, 113

[13] Ibid

[14] European Solidarity Corps, 'Discover The New Programme Funded by the European Union', https://europeansolidaritycorps.net/#front-page-4

[15] European Commission, 'EU-Japan Joint Press Statement: EU-Japan Exchange of Views on Loneliness and Social Isolation', https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/suica/announcements/eu-japan-joint-press-statement-eu-japan-exchange-views-loneliness-and-social-isolation_en

[16] Ibid, pp.2,11

[17] Ibid, pp.6,11

time.[18] This figure more than doubled to 25% in the first few months of the COVID-19 Pandemic.[19] The increase in feelings of loneliness was felt evenly (geographically speaking) across the Union, with all member states having loneliness levels of between 22%-26%.[20]

Young people (18-25 year olds), were most affected by COVID-19 in terms of feelings of loneliness. The proportion of young people who frequently felt lonely quadrupled in the first few months of the pandemic.[21] As a result of this spike, young people were the group who experienced loneliness the most, with 35% frequently feeling lonely.[22]

There are also a number of factors, unrelated to the pandemic, that can make feelings of loneliness more likely. Poverty is one example. In 2016, people who reported that they found it; 'very difficult to make ends meet' or 'difficult to make ends meet' had loneliness levels of 33% and 22% respectively, while people who were very easily able to make ends meet had loneliness levels of 5%.[23] Poor health is another example. Before the pandemic, 30% of people who were in poor health reported frequent feelings of loneliness compared to 8% of people who were in good health.[24] This shows that when we are trying to reduce loneliness in young people, we need to tailor policies and organisational practices to people who also experience other factors such as poverty and poor health.

Also relevant to this project, is EU-wide research on how loneliness affects prosocial behaviour such as volunteering. According to an analysis conducted by the Commission's Joint Research Centre, whilst volunteering does reduce loneliness, people who experience strong feelings of loneliness are actually less likely to volunteer.[25] This is due to the fact that when people feel ignored by society, they are more likely to adopt self-focused behaviour.[26] This demonstrates that while volunteering does indeed reduce feelings of loneliness, it is more difficult to get people who experience strong feelings of loneliness to initially take up volunteering activities. This shows the need to tailor policies and organisational practices to this particular group of people to help encourage them to volunteer.

European networks and organisations – best practices

LONELINESS EUROPE
The concept of loneliness is often more associated with the elderly than with young people. However, loneliness is in fact a condition that affects people of all ages. The organisation 'Loneliness Europe', works with experts in the field with a view to providing the best possible support to those experiencing loneliness.

There are two types of loneliness:

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[18] Joint Research Centre, 'Loneliness in the EU Insights From Surveys and Online Media Data', p.7, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC125873

[19] Ibid

[20] Ibid

[21] Ibid

[22] Joint Research Centre, 'Loneliness in Europe Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic', p.3, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC126802

[23] Ibid, p.4

[24] Ibid

[25] Joint Research Centre, 'Loneliness & Social and Civic Behaviours', pp.18, 20,21

[26] Ibid, 20

1) Firstly, there are those who already feel lonely, particularly adults. For this group of people it is beneficial to create an educational atmosphere in the neighbourhood, street or apartment buildings in which they live. It is important to create a safe space, where one does not just try to entertain those who are lonely but to fully connect with them and understand what they are going through.

2) Secondly is loneliness prevention which can act through projects targeting children, adolescents and their parents. Focus on the importance of the role of parents is important as they set an example and can be of great support to children or young people suffering from loneliness. Parents need to be able to listen to their children, and also ask for help should they require it, from specialists or support groups of those who have gone through similar experiences.

'The first step in combating loneliness is to accept that it is normal and that at some point in one's life everyone will experience/has experienced this feeling. Loneliness is a life process, so it cannot be fixed, but when people begin to realise this and break down this taboo there will be a greater connection with those who suffer from it.'

Judith Merkies, Loneliness Europe

EURODESK Brussels Link
Eurodesk attempts to combat loneliness among young people through inclusion. The network uses social media a lot and tries to keep up with the trends and platforms most used by young people in order to be able to reach more and more of them.

'Obviously, young people and their mental health need to be understood first, so that we can then interact with them and include them in activities such as volunteer work. The latter certainly can create strong self-esteem as it creates a sense and reason to feel useful. Therefore, volunteering can be a solution to loneliness and to engage young people and, according to Eurodesk, the use of peer to peer social media is the most effective instrument to use.'

Karolina Kosowska, EURODESK Brussels Link

3.2. DENMARK

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

Denmark gained freedom of association with the Constitution in 1849. The Constitution states that 'Citizens have the right to form associations for any lawful purpose without prior permission' and 'no association can be dissolved by a government measure'. The only limitation is that the association's purpose and activities must be legal.

Since then Denmark has devolved commonly used definitions of what a voluntary effort is, or what characterises a voluntary social organisation, but there is no law for organisations or on volunteering. However, you must have a clean children's certificate if you work with young people under the age of 16. Legislation from other areas may also apply, such as the Personal Data Act, liability for damages or possibly employee liability.

What governs and determines the association can therefore be its own articles of association or statutes. However, since there are no formal requirements to do so, it is up to the individual association what should be included. There is however a long tradition of building an association therefore, the vast majority of associations

are structured with the following; articles of association, a general meeting, a board of directors, volunteers and possibly employees. Several public and private funds will also require that an association has statutes and is, for example, democratically structured.

Denmark has no specific governmental bodies to deal with volunteering and youth – it lies as part of various ministries.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

Denmark has a long tradition of national strategies and policies that support voluntary work and the social inclusion of disadvantaged people in civil society through volunteering in non-profit organisations.

The latest recommendations, for a new civil society strategy, were developed by a working group in 2021 which consisted of; the Voluntary Council, Voluntary Centres & Self-Help Denmark (FriSe), the Civil Society's Industry Association, the Danish Disabled Organisations and the Council for the Socially Vulnerable. The creation of the new recommendations and the working group was decided by the government and a broad majority of parties. The recommendations focused, among other things, on how to ensure more sustainable funding of civil society's social work, how to ensure greater inclusion of citizens in vulnerable positions in voluntary work, and how to combat loneliness through increased cooperation and a national strategy.

Also in 2021, a recommendation for a national strategy to combat loneliness was also developed. Red Cross and the Elderly Cause, together with 88 other organisations, prepared an inspirational presentation for a national loneliness strategy, which was sent to the government and parliament. The presentation contained recommendations to reduce loneliness in five areas; home and housing, school and education, leisure and communities, working life and employment, and health and care.

The result of the two documents/recommendations is that a broad political majority in November 2021 decided on a new civil society strategy for 2022-2025. Here, among other things, it was decided that Denmark should have the first national loneliness strategy. Therefore, a national partnership, led by the Red Cross and the Elderly Cause, was formed to:

- Gather scientific and practical knowledge about loneliness from Danish and foreign initiatives, as well as action plans and strategies and including knowledge about effective tools and initiatives that prevent and remedy loneliness.
- Initiate a national conversation about loneliness.
- Prepare a proposal for a national strategy against loneliness that sets a common direction for combating loneliness nationally and across sectors.
- Prepare a proposal for an action plan that points to concrete solutions.

Based on the recommendations for a new civil society strategy, the political majority also decided to set aside a pool of DKK 23.5 million to support Voluntary Centres & Self-Help Denmark, along with The National Board of Social Affairs and five local partners to test a new model designed to increase the participation of people in a vulnerable position, including people with disabilities, in social communities through volunteering in a bid to reduce loneliness. The first two local projects run by two volunteer centres are starting in December 2022 and both projects are targeting vulnerable and lonely people from 16-32 years old. The projects run for a four-year period and in 2024 three more projects are planned.

Another major effort in Denmark is that more than 90 organisations, associations, schools, municipalities, and companies have come together to create a people's movement against loneliness.

The Crown Princess Mary Foundation has also just started a project to:

● Track down and help the severely lonely in colleges and similar environments
● Do social training and mindfulness in groups both physically and online
● Provide connection for them to a community guide via an app

We also see that municipalities are starting to develop their own strategy against loneliness, for example, in the spring of 2022, the municipality of Aarhus adopted their own strategy.

Relevant national research on the topic

In 2017, a large study showed that approx. 8 % of people in Denmark feel lonely. The survey also showed that slightly more women than men feel lonely, that there is a greater risk of loneliness if you are born with a different ethnic background than Danish, if you are unemployed, have a chronic illness or a long-term mental disorder. Data from the Department of Public Health at the University of Copenhagen shows that there was a particularly high level of loneliness in the population during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and that the most significant increase was among young people aged 16-29. The National Health Profile 2021 showed that approx. 12% over the age of 16 felt lonely. The figures cannot, due to a presumed COVID effect, be directly compared to the research in 2017, but researchers in the field point out that it must be assumed that the entire increase cannot be attributed to COVID-19 alone.

In 2021, a study was published by Defactum, a research and consulting firm, in which they screened 14,267 studies worldwide of loneliness and closely studied 136 to see what types of interventions work and how well they work. There is an article in English which is under review, so it has not been published yet and must not be shared.

3.3. IRELAND

Volunteers make a vital contribution to Irish society, developing communities as vibrant, inclusive and sustainable places where people want to live. The economic, cultural and social benefits of volunteering permeate through an incredibly diverse range of activities which include providing support to arts and heritage, education, health, sport and the socially marginalised.

The purpose and value of volunteering has never been more prevalent than in recent months. The COVID-19 pandemic and crises in Ukraine, has shone a light on the civic spirit and hands-on approach of volunteers willing to help fight and do their part as we support our communities and people. These volunteering experiences have had a profound impact on all volunteers, many of whom have volunteered for the first time and headed straight into the frontline to provide vital support to those most vulnerable members of our communities as well as those further afield.

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

Garda Vetting

Legislation and other regulation important for organising volunteering with disadvantaged youths in Ireland includes Garda Vetting (Police Check) from The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016[27]*.* This provides a statutory basis for the vetting of persons carrying out relevant work with children or vulnerable persons.

Under the Acts, any person whose work or activity involves access to children or vulnerable persons must be vetted. Workers include staff, volunteers and those on student placements working for a relevant organisation through which they have access to children and/or vulnerable adults. The act defines 'relevant organisation' as one that employs or permits a person to carry out work or activities which mainly consist of them having access to, or contact with, children or vulnerable persons. The Act also creates offences and penalties for persons who fail to comply with its provisions. The Act stipulates that a relevant organisation shall not permit any person to undertake relevant work or activities, unless the organisation receives a vetting disclosure from the National Vetting Bureau in respect of that person.

If a person is seeking employment or intending to volunteer with an organisation which conducts relevant work, the person will be asked to make an application to be vetted. In Ireland, local volunteer centres are registered with the National Vetting Bureau which carries out the service for volunteer-involving organisations in their county.

Garda vetting (Police check) is conducted on behalf of registered organisations only and is not conducted for individual persons on a personal basis. Special projects or organisations who work in the field of volunteering with disadvantaged youth.

Children First

Children First is the National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children[28] was launched on October 2nd 2017. This Guidance is a primary reference for all citizens to report concerns and includes the new legislative obligations. It provides clarity between the legislation and the existing non-statutory obligations which will continue to operate for all sectors of society.

Children First Guidance describes the four main types of abuse and sets out the steps which should be taken to ensure that the child or young person is protected from harm. It has been updated to include new information about the Children First Act 2015 and it includes specific information for the professionals and organisations that now have legal obligations to keep children safe. In January 2019 the Children First Guidance was amended to ensure that online safety is specifically accounted for in child safeguarding statements, as required under the Children First Act.

The Guidance also outlines the roles of the main statutory bodies involved in child welfare and protection: Tusla - Child and Family Agency, and An Garda Síochána. It contains details of how to report a concern about a child and what happens once the report is received by Tusla.

Convention of Children's Rights

In 1992 Ireland signed up to the convention of Children's rights (under 18s)[29]. Children's rights include the right to health, education, family life, play and recreation, an adequate standard of living and to be protected from abuse and harm. Children's rights cover their developmental and age-appropriate needs that change over time

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[27] National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 (irishstatutebook.ie)

[28] https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/36/enacted/en/html

[29] What are Children's Rights? | Children's Rights Alliance (childrensrights.ie)

as a child grows up.

Relevant policies

The National Volunteering Strategy (2021 - 2025)[30] sets out a long-term vision for volunteering and volunteers in Ireland. With actions to be implemented over five years, the Strategy sets out a general direction for government policy in relation to the volunteers and the volunteering environment. It also builds upon and strengthens the renewed relationship and partnership between Government and the voluntary sector which has developed during the course of its preparation.

The purpose of the Strategy is to recognise, support and promote the unique value and contribution of volunteers to Irish society. The Strategy also provides an opportunity for the Government to acknowledge how important volunteering is to the well-being of the nation and to steer the delivery of an agreed and ambitious vision. The contribution of volunteering to our society has never been more prevalent than during the response in the last number of months to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been co-produced by the Government and people from the community development, local development, community and voluntary, business and local government sectors. It is an ambitious strategy to support partnership and collaborative effort at all levels and between all stakeholders, comprising five high level objectives and 56 associated actions to support communities, their representative organisations, and the community and voluntary sector.

This Strategy seeks to develop and enhance the role of the volunteer and encourage volunteering as a means of developing vibrant communities. It will provide the framework and the building blocks to realise this vision, through the implementation of the following strategic objectives.

As a part of the strategy a consultation was held with young volunteers in Ireland. Their input is paramount in order to further promote, develop and nurture the role of volunteering across all youth age categories, from 12 to 25 years of age.

Relevant national research on the topic

According to the Central Statistics office in Ireland,[31] over 1 million people in Ireland volunteer each year. Annually, this adds up to an economic contribution of €5 billion per year (this is based on the value of the 232.8 million hours given average industrial wage). Of these people 16.8% are between the ages of 15-24 and 21.7% are between the ages of 25-34. Half of all volunteering was work carried out directly by individuals (54.7% of hours worked) rather than through organisations (45.3%). The younger members of the population (15-24) who volunteered tended more than other age groups to volunteer through an organisation (68.8% of hours worked).

The overall rate of volunteering for the country stood at 28.4% of persons in Quarter 3 2013. This figure included all types of work outside the volunteer's household as long as it was unpaid and non-compulsory. The value of this work (after annualising the hours and applying the national minimum wage) amounted to over €2 billion annually.

Over 47% of all volunteering hours were carried out by those aged 45 to 64. Those who volunteered the least number of hours were the 15 to 24 age group (6.9% of hours). Over a quarter of those aged 65 and above volunteered and accounted for over 41 million annualised hours (17.7%).

Volunteering has significant benefits to the health and well-being of those who volunteer and by extension their

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[30] gov.ie - National Volunteering Strategy (2021 - 2025) (www.gov.ie)

[31] QNHS Volunteering and Wellbeing Q3 2013 - CSO - Central Statistics Office

communities – in a 2018 survey by Volunteer Ireland[32], 51% of volunteers reported that their physical health and wellbeing had improved and 62% reported that their mental health and wellbeing had improved. Volunteering also supports those in unemployment to return to the workforce by helping them develop skills and build confidence.

The National Youth Council in Ireland first published a report on young people and volunteering in Ireland in 2011[33]. From this report several recommendations came to light such as the importance of flexibility or young people when volunteering as well as the promotion of different types of volunteering such as 'activism' as opposed to traditional ideas of fundraising. The research however would suggest that access to volunteering can often be, but by no means always, limited to those with more opportunities in Irish society. Those experiencing economic, personal or social difficulties may be more at risk of being excluded from volunteering. Analysis of Central Statistics Office[34] well-being data shows that there has been an 80% decrease in the number of young adults aged 18-34, who rated their overall life satisfaction as *High* in April 2020 when compared with the 2018 rate.

An EU-wide survey by Eurofound also in April 2020[35], reported that almost a quarter of this age group in Ireland felt lonely *All or most of the time* over the two-week period prior to interview - the second highest rate in the 17 EU countries for which data was available. Commenting on the survey results, Eurofound said that the *'lowest levels of mental well-being are reported among young people and those looking for work. Loneliness is emerging as a key aspect of mental health with one-fifth of young Europeans feeling the strong impact of pandemic restrictions'.* The 18-34 year-old age group were most likely to feel nervous (51.2%), downhearted or depressed (45.2%) or lonely (41.5%), *At least some of the time* in the four-week period prior to interview.

As a part of the consultation process for the National Volunteer Strategy, 50 young people were interviewed from the Youth Reference Panel of Foróige, Ireland's leading youth organisation. Six questions were posed to Foróige participants about volunteering, including:

- What does volunteering mean to you?
- How do young people currently volunteer?
- What do 'The Beneficiaries' get from volunteering?
- What do volunteers get from volunteering?
- What are the challenges or barriers to volunteering for young people?
- What support do young people need to get involved in volunteering?
- What volunteering opportunities would you like to see available to young people over the next 5 years?

This Strategy will build upon this consultation to further promote, develop and nurture the role of volunteering across all youth age categories, from 12 to 25 years of age, and wider society.

Best practices

Loneliness Taskforce

In 2021 a Loneliness Taskforce[36] was created in Ireland combined of a large number of organisations working together to address loneliness in Ireland. Whilst it was initiated by a charity focused on older people, youth organisations in Ireland such as Jigsaw and community organisations such as Muintir Na Tire are also involved.

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[32] Volunteer-Ireland-Report-FINAL.pdf

[33] Lending-a-Hand_Young-People-and-Volunteering.pdf (youth.ie)

[34] Social Impact of COVID-19 Survey April 2020 - CSO - Central Statistics Office

[35] Living, working and COVID-19 data | Eurofound (europa.eu)

[36] 'Addressing loneliness has become more important than ever', says Taskforce - ALONE

As such the Loneliness Taskforce is a coalition of organisations and individuals who work to address loneliness. The purpose of the Taskforce is to increase awareness of loneliness and to continually advocate for policy change to address loneliness at local and national level.

Youthreach Programme

The Youthreach programme[37] provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. In these types of programmes, volunteering is used and encouraged as a path to develop the young person's ongoing personal development.

There are almost 6,000 places available nationwide under the Youthreach umbrella and learners on the Youthreach programme are entitled to receive training allowances.

The programme usually provides two years integrated education, training and work experience. Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme, and the application of new technology is integrated into all aspects of programme content. There is a strong emphasis on personal development, on the core skills of literacy/numeracy, communications and IT, along with a choice of vocational options and volunteering.

spunout

Established in 2005, spunout helps to create an Ireland where young people aged between 16 and 25 are empowered with the information they need to live active, happy, and healthy lives.

They aim to educate and inform young people about the importance of holistic wellbeing and how good health can be maintained, both physically and mentally.

They believe young people should have easy access to relevant, reliable, and non-judgemental information and provide a dynamic, responsive website full of up-to-date, factual information, free of any shame or bias. spunout is led by a reader community and young volunteers. A group of 130 young people from around the country forms the spunout Youth Action Panels which provide leadership to the organisation.

Hundreds of young people volunteer their time to the work of the organisation through writing articles, proofreading content, making videos and giving feedback.

As a part of their services, they support young people who may be experiencing loneliness[38] and advocate on the benefits of volunteering for young people as a form of social inclusion[39].

Jigsaw

Jigsaws mission is to make sure that every young person's mental health is valued and supported. They understand that mental health can affect every aspect of a young person's life and believe every young person must have the support that's right for them, whatever they are going through.

Jigsaw Youth Advocates are volunteers who support the organisations' goal of achieving better mental health outcomes for young people. Youth advocates create understanding, raise awareness of and promote youth mental health within their own community. They are also a key element of the youth voice and engagement approach within Jigsaw in the battle against loneliness and isolation in young people[40].

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[37] gov.ie - Youthreach (www.gov.ie)

[38] https://spunout.ie/mental-health/self-care/loneliness

[39] https://spunout.ie/voices/experiences/volunteering-barretstown-life-changing-experience

[40] https://jigsaw.ie/loneliness-and-isolation/

3.4. GERMANY

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

Social commitment and social participation are essential pillars of democratic coexistence in Germany. The value of volunteering is socially and politically widely acknowledged. It is believed that volunteering does serve the well-being of society and can also be of benefit to the people who engage in it. Volunteering has a long tradition and goes by the term 'Ehrenamt' or 'bürgerschaftliches Engagement' (civic engagement).

Civilian service, 'Zivildienst', in Germany was the most common form of alternative service at the time of compulsory military service in the Federal Republic of Germany from 1961 to 2011. Since 2011, the obligation to perform civilian service was suspended and the law on Federal Volunteer Service – *Bundesfreiwilligendienstgesetz*[41] was introduced. This law regulates the interests of volunteers (over 27 years old), assignment sides and other stakeholders. For underaged and young adults under 27, the Law on the Promotion of Youth Volunteer Services – *Jugendfreiwilligendienstegesetz*[42] applies. These laws have high standards and regulate conditions for a short or long-term voluntary service.

Other legal provisions relevant to volunteering can be found in different law texts as Sozialgesetzbücher (Social Codes) II and XII (volunteering by unemployed or welfare recipients), Sozialgesetzbuch VIII (open youth/street work), the Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch (Civil Code: public insurance for volunteers), the Income Tax Code (definition of charitable/ non-profit status of bodies, rules for tax-free expense allowance, etc).

The Federal Office for Family and Civil Society Tasks - *Bundesamt für Familie und zivilgesellschaftliche Aufgaben or BAFzA* – is a governmental body responsible for coordinated cooperation between the state and citizens as well as clubs, associations and foundations. The tasks of the BAFzA are broad and range from the Federal Volunteer Service to various programs of the European Social Fund as well as support services for programs for democracy, children and youth, disabled people, and women in need.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth and best practices

The results of the recent German Survey on Volunteering[43] show that 3.7% (ca. 28.8 mill) of the resident population of Germany from the age of 14 years and above is actively involved in volunteering.

Within the general debate on inclusive volunteering in Germany, youth work has been the first area to explore what opportunities and challenges for disadvantaged young people can be created. One of the biggest is called 'People Strengthen People'. This supports the participation and willingness of people to help other as well as receive support in everyday life or on their educational/career path[44]. The project was launched at the beginning of 2016 as a sponsorship program for refugees. Building on the experience and success of this programme, the concept was expanded at the end of 2018 to include 'opportunity sponsorships' for people in disadvantaged living situations. By April 2022, the programme had attracted more than 176,000 sponsorships who provide interpersonal contact in everyday matters.

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[41] Gesetz über den Bundesfreiwilligendienst (Bundesfreiwilligendienstgesetz - BFDG)

[42] Gesetz zur Förderung von Jugendfreiwilligendiensten

[43] Julia Simonson et all. 'Freiwilliges Enagement in Deutschland. Survey on Volunteering 2019'

[44] Menschen stärken Menschen – a federal programme, supported by the German Government.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, BürgerStiftung Hamburg, one of the biggest local organisations with more than 400 volunteers, initiated a row of successful projects dedicated to initiatives that were already active in their district. The focus was on cultural, educational, and physical activity projects for children and young people from difficult socioeconomic conditions, affected by the pandemic crises. The purpose was to strengthen civil society and the sense of togetherness of young people in their local area.

One example of a good practice is a project 'Yoldaş'- Tandem[45]. In this project, a volunteer adult and a child from a Turkish-speaking family come together as companions who meet regularly, discover Hamburg, play, talk and open new perspectives for each other. During the long period of lockdown, volunteers provided orientation and helped with homeschooling. This prevents children from deprived areas from isolation and loneliness and supports them in integration activities.

Another successful example is the project 'You:sful'. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and lockdown, many schools and initiatives closed. Several schools however decided to continue albeit with limitations but were convinced of the need for their commitment to young people at that time. Through this new projects emerged such as a campaign to make senior citizens aware of the rapidly developing assistance services in their neighbourhood, an exchange of letters with isolated residents of senior citizens' homes and other environmental and digital engagement projects.

Relevant national research on the topic and best practices

In 2020, BürgerStiftung Hamburg created a project that encouraged socially disadvantaged children, young people and families to help them to help themselves and contribute to equal opportunities. In this way, they helped to counteract the consequences of disadvantage and poverty and improve the conditions for a fulfilled, self-determined life. These projects were possible due to the participation of numerous Hamburg citizens and it is a central concern to encourage people to get involved in voluntary work and to support them in doing so. These projects range from promoting reading and mentoring, to the involvement of school classes that develop their own community projects.

In addition to this operational project work, BürgerStiftung Hamburg supported local initiatives that were already successfully active in local neighbourhoods where the focus was on cultural, educational and exercise projects for children and young people from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. With the community fund 'Hamburger Spielräume' (Hamburg Play Spaces), selective and one-off activities that create balance and free space in COVID-19 were able to be created.

In January 2020, the first meeting of the new Youth Environment Council took place where 30 young people between 14 to 23 years old were asked to approve funding for environmental commitment projects by young Hamburgers. Awards went to urban gardening and environmental education projects, among others. Since then, the young volunteers have regularly reviewed and discussed project applications and voted on the allocation of funds.

In June 2020, BürgerStiftung Hamburg set up the 'Migrant Engagement' fund to support voluntary initiatives founded by migrants for migrants. The first 13 project applications are approved, with a further twelve funding commitments to follow by the end of the year.

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[45] Bürgerstiftung - Annual report 2020 p.6

Interesting quotes:

'The Youth Environmental Council gives me the chance to get involved with many Hamburg environmental projects, to promote them and to make a difference.' says 20-year-old Alexander Schulze about his involvement.

'Everyone who does something for others makes the world a little better. We support volunteers in Hamburg by strengthening them, accompanying them, and offering them opportunities to develop. Because we want to show as many people as possible: You belong. You can make a difference. Let's shape our city together.' BürgerStiftung Jahresbericht 2021

'Many migrants or refugees are looking for participation. Voluntary work brings valuable experience, can create meaning in life, and one becomes part of society.' BürgerStiftung Jahresbericht 2021

There is an impressive quote from a young Syrian on the MITmachers' website. He says, *'We don't lack motivation, we lack opportunities.'* How exactly do the MITmakers help? Many refugees or migrants would like to do something, they are looking for orientation and participation. So we don't need to encourage them, but we do need to show them ways. The 'MITmacher' help and accompany people into voluntary work. *'People come to us who want to volunteer - and we look for a project that fits. This strengthens them because they can feel part of society. It's about respect and appreciation. We have a database of about 300 places that we can contact. The volunteer position is then limited to three months. After that, many volunteers receive training in the area that interests and in many cases they have gained a very important experience in their voluntary work.'*

The story of Homayoon Pardis is crucial. He is a refugee from Afghanistan who is sharing his experience as a volunteer in an interview from the Advisory Board 'Migrant Engagement' of the BürgerStiftung Hamburg.[46]

'What helped you not to lose courage and to settle in Hamburg?'

'I'll just say voluntary work. Because through volunteering I got to know more and more people and was able to build up a network. At that time, I hung up a large sheet of paper in our room within the accommodation and wrote 'Everything will be fine' on it in large letters, in German.'

'Why is volunteering so important socially, especially for refugees and migrants?'

Voluntary work brings valuable experience, can create meaning in life, and it enables real participation in society. Everything I have - my job, my home, my arrival in Germany - I have all this. I have all that through my voluntary work. You help, you are helped at some point. People from Afghanistan are always surprised when I tell them about it. 'You work without pay?' We don't have that in our country. 'I always earned it,' I reply, Volunteering connects you with the world. In the beginning Hamburg was so big. Now it's small for me. I have found friends here who are part of my family. Sometimes I think I'm dreaming.

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[46] BürgerStiftung – annual report 2021, p. 4-8

3.5. SLOVENIA

Legal environment for volunteering and youth in Slovenia

The main law regarding volunteering in Slovenia, no matter the age of the volunteer, is the Volunteering Act that was accepted in 2011 (Volunteering Act, 2011). There is no single public body responsible for volunteering in Slovenia. Different Ministries and Government Offices are involved in the category of youth volunteering and obtain different roles:

➢ Ministry of Public Administration
➢ Ministry of Education, Science and Sport
➢ Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Family and Equal Opportunities,
➢ Ministry of Interior,
➢ Ministry of Defence,
➢ Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth.

The Ministry of Public Administration is in charge of regulatory reform as well as similar issues regarding NGOs in general. Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia are the main promoters of volunteering in the context of social welfare and they prepare various analyses and research on the role of volunteers that are included in social welfare programmes. Here, volunteering is seen as a measure of social activation. A range of ministries contribute by funding volunteering and voluntary programmes.

A range of different ministries and governmental offices are involved in the implementation of policies and programmes in this field. Among them, the Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth is in charge of coordinating a national programme for youths with the priority to promote volunteering among young people and reduce the proportion of young people who don't engage in voluntary activities. (European Commission)

The Ministry of Public Administration was responsible for the process of drafting the new National strategy for the development of non-governmental sector and volunteering, based on the Volunteering Act in Slovenia which was adopted in March 2018 (National Strategy for the Development of the Non-Governmental Sector and Volunteering by 2023, 2018).

Among the main non-public actors taking part in the development of policies in the field of youth volunteering, the following organisations representing non-profit sector have been recognised:

● Slovenian Network of Voluntary Organisations (Slovenska mreža prostovoljskih organizacij)
● Slovene Philanthropy (Slovenska filantropija)
● National Youth Council (Mladinski svet Slovenije)
● MOVIT, Institute for Development of Youth Mobility (MOVIT, Zavod za razvoj mobilnosti mladih)
● Institute Nefiks, Institute for Promotion and Recording of Informally Acquired Knowledge (Zavod Nefiks, Inštitut za promocijo in beleženje neformalno pridobljenega znanja)
● Youth Network MaMa (Zavod Mladinska mreža MaMa)
● Institute Voluntariat (Zavod Voluntariat).
   (European Commission)

With the cooperation between various volunteering organisations, the Volunteering Ethics Code was established in 2006, which contains basic guidelines and minimum standards that volunteers and their organisations are encouraged to comply with. The Code gives basic instructions for volunteer work which is applicable to all types of voluntary organisations and volunteers. By signing the Code, the organisation also obtains the right to use the logo of Volunteering as a symbol of the quality of their work (Slovenska filantropija, 2020).

Relevant policies

Based on our current research, there hasn't been a specific national or local plan nor a programme implemented, that is specifically tackling loneliness, isolation and the exclusion of youth due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Different organisations are trying to implement their own practices to tackle the above mentioned problematic area and we will describe these good practices later.

Relevant national research

The National Youth Council of Slovenia, conducted research in 2020 that focused on young people and their experience and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have concluded that during the period of self-isolation with the absence of contact with people, feelings of loneliness increased. Furthermore, 13% of participants answered that they did not have anyone to turn to, and that they felt left to themselves. (National Youth Council of Slovenia, 2020).)

'Mladina 2020' researched the situation of young people in Slovenia over the last ten years and also showed that the number of young people who feel lonely has increased by 76% in the last ten years. Also, the number of young people who feel stressed most days of the week has increased by 110% (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport: Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth, 2020). This is confirmed by the data from other official institutions, which show that in the last 25 years, mental health problems in young people (by the age of 18) have increased by 64%. Data from the National Institute of Public Health also show a similar picture. In the publication 'Mental health of children and young people in Slovenia', it is stated that 73% more medication has been administered to young people between the ages of 15 and 19 for the treatment of mental health than in 2008 (Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje, 2018). All these trends clearly show that the mental health of young people today appears as a key challenge of youth policy.

Youth network 'MaMa' created a questionnaire regarding mental health of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic as one of their activities under the project titled 'Mental health of young people in youth centres'. The goal of the questionnaire was to obtain information and opinions from youth centres (who play a very important role in social change) about the needs of young people in the field of mental health. 42 youth centres from all over Slovenia answered questions about their experience with young people and activities in the field of mental health. Of these, 40.5% estimate that the general mental health of young people was worse before the pandemic, 42.9% noticed a deterioration in this area among young people during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and just under 12% of youth centres believe that the situation has not changed significantly compared to the time before the pandemic. Nevertheless, 40 out of 42 youth centres believe, based on their experience, that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental state of young people (Zavod Mladinska mreža MaMa, 2021).

During the pandemic, 69% of youth centres noticed an increase in young people with mental health problems and 31% of youth centres did not notice a difference compared to the time before the pandemic (Zavod Mladinska mreža MaMa, 2021).

During this time, there was also an increase in the number of youth centres that have encountered and dealt with specific mental health problems among young people. During the pandemic, 66.7% of youth centres encountered anxiety disorders and attention disorders, and 61.9% of youth centres encountered depression among young people. Furthermore, there was an increase in psychotic disorders (encountered by 33.3% of youth centres) and an increase in suicide rates (also encountered by 23.8% of youth centres during the pandemic) which is much more compared to the time before the pandemic.

Some youth centres have also noticed new mental health difficulties among young people, and have highlighted insomnia and anxiety, which they believe are the result of distance learning (studying from home). Four youth centres (9.5%) did not encounter any mental health problems in young people either before or during the pandemic.
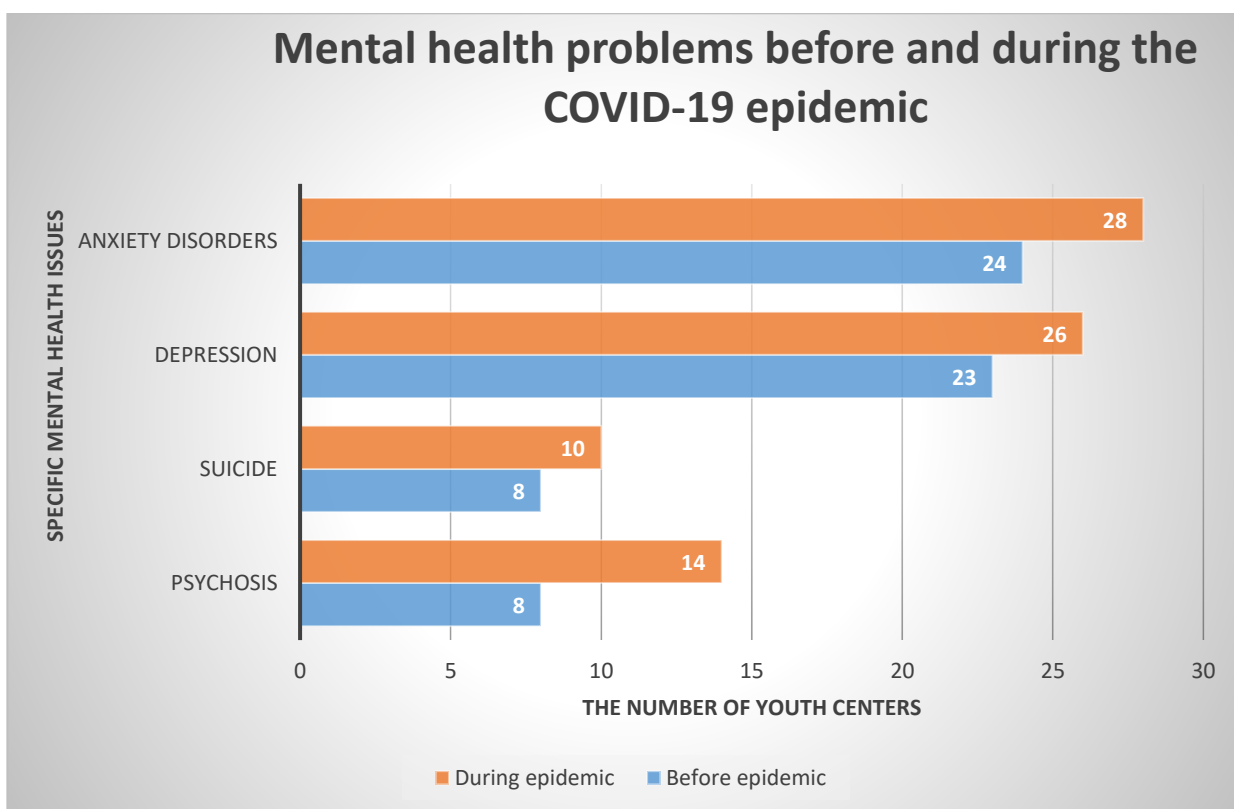
Chart 1: Mental Health problems before and during the COVID-19 pandemic
Source: Zavod Mladinska mreža MaMa, 2021.

As we see in Chart 1, the majority of specific mental health issues have increased during the pandemic and there are different reasons for the deterioration of mental health among young people during this time. As many as 38 out of 42 youth centres believe that the increase in mental health problems is the result of social isolation and the feeling of loneliness (95 %). 87.5 % of youth centres see the reason for the lack of physical space, and 80 % of them believe that the dysfunctional family environment during the pandemic contributed to the increase in mental health problems. They also noticed other reasons, such as distance learning (65%), movement restrictions coupled with an uncertain future (60%), and illness and death of loved ones (22.5%) (Zavod Mladinska mreža MaMa, 2021).
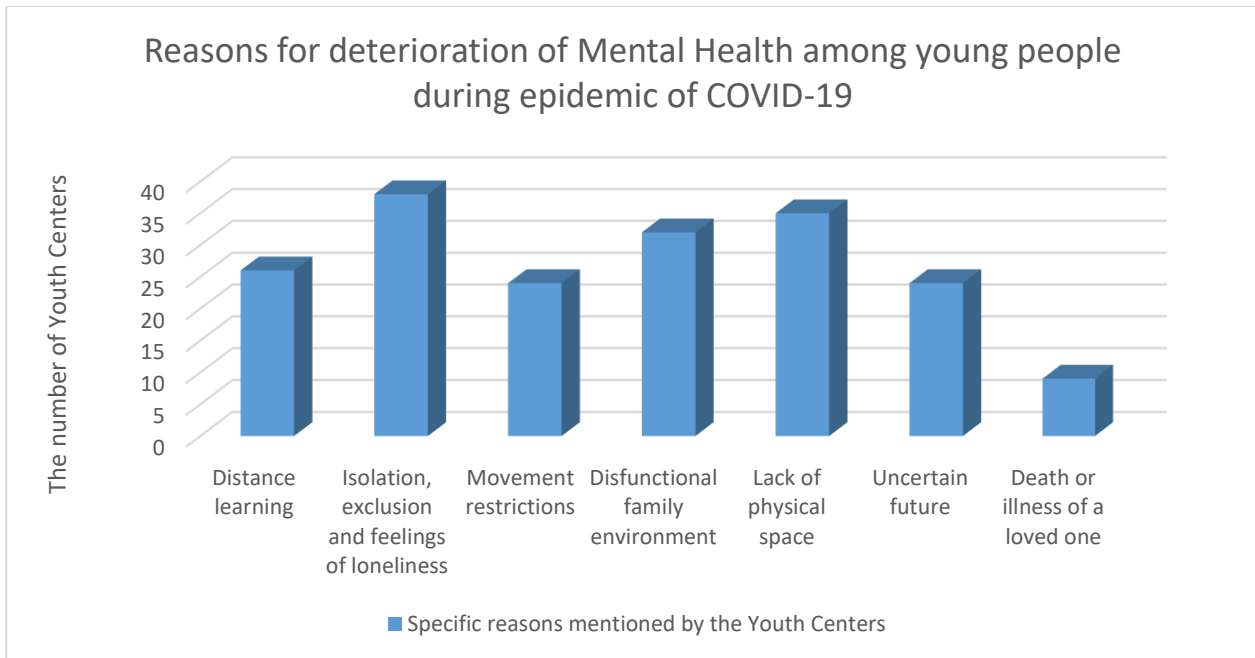
Chart 2: Reasons for deterioration of Mental Health among young people during pandemic of COVID-19.
Source: Zavod Mladinska mreža MaMa, 2021

We can conclude that different mental health problems have increased among young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the research, the most common reason for the increased problems is isolation, exclusion and feelings of loneliness amongst young people. Hopefully, if we can work on these factors, the mental health problems may decrease or not worsen.

Examples of good practices

Creatively against COVID-19
The project 'Ustvarjalno proti covidu' ('Creatively against COVID-19') was formed by a non-governmental organisation in response to the increase in mental distress among young people, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Their aim was to implement a project where they can offer young people a safe space to talk, to offer informative content about mental health and to raise awareness of how to deal with difficulties. It also provided information on where to turn to if they need help, and through workshops, develop and discover topics that young people see as a challenge and can focus on together with a therapist on solving problems and sharing experiences. Another part of the project is dedicated to creative practice, where young people can creatively express their feelings. The project results will be available by the end of this year.

Phone companionship and Intergenerational Cooperation
Non-governmental organisations are connecting volunteer high school students with elderly people via phone calls to help decrease feelings of loneliness, isolation, and exclusion. In some organisations, this practice has evolved into visitations and spending quality time together.

Individual and group activities
The implementation of a variety of individual and group activities geared towards youths with the purpose of social integration that can help overcome feelings of loneliness, exclusion and isolation amongst youths.

Activities range from individual conversations, psychosocial support, empowerment, as well as practices for strengthening self-esteem, self-image and self-confidence. Among group activities, there are different social games, workshops and educational seminars. The inclusion of volunteers that are dealing with loneliness, exclusion and isolation not only helps other young people, but by being a part of the process, they are also helping themselves.

3.6. CROATIA

Volunteering in Croatia has a long tradition related to the concept of solidarity. This is a significant value from the past for Croatia, and has been used in many different ways than how it is understood today. Croatian society has been through many political and social turbulences that brought a sense of insecurity in peoples' lives and created a culture of givers and receivers and as such, has influenced the general perception of who can volunteer.

To determine exactly which factors made the most contribution to the change in how Croatian society values volunteering is unfortunately, not possible due to a lack of serious, nationwide scientific research on the topic.

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

The Law on Volunteering[47] was adopted by the Croatian Parliament on May 18th, 2007 with amendments on February 8th, 2013 and 31st July 2021.

The law states the following definition: 'Volunteering is an investment of personal time, effort, knowledge and skills made out of one's free will to carry out services and activities for the well-being of another person or the community, and are executed by the persons without existence of any conditions of a financial reward or any other material benefit for the work done'.

Besides the principles embedded in the definition, the law on volunteering defines additional basic volunteering principles, such as; the non-discrimination of volunteers and volunteering beneficiaries, the protection of volunteering beneficiaries, non-exploitation of volunteers, minor volunteer protection, education for volunteering purposes (educating for values, inclusive volunteering, non-chargeability for volunteering, free will and solidarity of volunteering and the mobility of volunteers.

The Law on Volunteering contains; the definition of volunteering, principles and conditions for volunteering, the rights and obligations of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, the conditions for conclusion of volunteering contracts, the adoption of the Code of ethics for volunteers, the issuing of the volunteering certificate, the national volunteer award as well as the means for supervising the implementation of this Law.

Currently, The Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy ensures the adherence of this law and other regulations deriving from it. As well as this, the Ministry monitors the execution of the Law and collects feedback from organisations about the consequences of its implementation through:

- Ensuring the application of the Law and other regulations deriving from the Law.
- Monitoring and proposing adequate measures.
- Collecting data based on yearly reports on the number of volunteer involving organisations and the number of volunteers in the Republic of Croatia and the citizens of the Republic of Croatia who are volunteering abroad.

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[47] https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2007_06_58_1863.html

- Convening the inaugural session of the National Board for Volunteerism Development.
- Organising activities and measures to develop and apply this law.
- Acting as a coordinator and technical support for the National Board for Volunteerism Development.

There are certain situations with volunteering that may require additional precaution and/or application measures, as people involved may be those belonging to vulnerable groups such as; children and youth, persons with mental disabilities, criminal offenders, those involved in crisis or foreign nationals.

Besides the Law on Volunteering, there are other regulations of volunteering, which all together form a *National Policy on the Development of Volunteering.* These are:

Volunteer Code of Ethics[48] which introduces a set of values and codes of conduct for volunteers, volunteer involving organisations and beneficiaries in accordance with the principles of volunteering from the Law on Volunteering.

National Programme for Volunteerism Development 2020-2024 which is in the process of adoption and provides basic guidelines and priorities for the future development of volunteerism in Croatia.

Certificate of competencies gained through volunteering which is official recognition and validation of competencies gained through volunteering. This is prepared and published by the Ministry responsible for volunteering to provide support to volunteers in recognition of their competences (knowledge, skills, autonomy and responsibility) acquired through their volunteering experience and may be presented to any third party such as employers or university.

Regarding the regulations relevant for youths, there is currently no active legal framework for youth in Croatia. *The National Youth Programme 2022 – 2024* is currently being designed which aims to create a nurturing environment for the development of young people's potential in order to raise the quality of their lives and encourage them to achieve their optimal social integration. Since there is no Law on Youth or any other law concerning youth (besides the Law on Youth Councils, OG 41/14), this programme is the only legal framework for youth in Croatia. One of the areas of the draft programme is dedicated to the mental health of youth as well as to social inclusion of youth.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

At this time, there are no specific policies tackling loneliness and isolation of youth in Croatia. Indeed, there are no active policies that tackle these issues at all. There is a draft *Strategic Framework for Development of Mental Health 2022 – 2030,* but it's yet to be adopted. This document will be tackling the concepts of isolation and loneliness, acknowledges the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and recognises the importance of investing in youth mental health.

Besides that, there is a *National Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* that partially examines the role of civil society organisations and how they may have improved the mental health of youths. As well as this the plan also looks at the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in general.

Relevant national research on the topic

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[48] https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2008_05_55_1915.html

According to the IZA Institute of research[49] and JRC analyses of the European Commission[50], on the eve of the pandemic, as many as 9% of the European population suffered from loneliness, and 21% from social isolation. The highest rates were recorded in Eastern Europe (Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia and others), followed by Southern Europe (the rest of the Balkans). Further research looked into what kind of mark the coronavirus pandemic will leave. In the Balkans (Croatia, Greece, Bulgaria), the feeling of loneliness was reported by 10 to 15% more than in the period before the pandemic. A study conducted after the earthquake and quarantine by a team of psychologists from the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb showed that 29% of respondents had a mild to moderate level of depression and that every fifth person had severe episodes of depression and anxiety during the crisis. The second phase of research demonstrated that the mental health of Croatian citizens was further impaired - especially among women, young people, singles and those without children.

Besides this particular research, there are also several local research pieces on the topic of loneliness and isolation of youth that also support these statistics. All research confirms that feelings of loneliness have grown, especially in young people, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as such has created a new pandemic of the feeling of loneliness.

Best practices

Regarding best practice in this area, many different activities and projects can be found in Croatia such as walking together, spending social quality time, social workshops, etc. but they are mostly organised for elderly people. Most of those projects involve schools and raising awareness in young people on the issue of loneliness for elderly people, especially those in homes for the elderly. In this sense, such kinds of activities, although tackling issues of loneliness, are more focused on intergenerational solidarity and providing social contact which occurs mostly during the holidays.

It is also worth mentioning that various festivals (such as Mentalist) and public discussion on the topic of loneliness as well as dialogues, symposiums and conferences can now be found, especially during the last two years.

However, there are some organisations and projects that are involving youths feeling lonely and isolated and they are outlined below.

Association How are you?
Many people in Croatia, either because of the pandemic or because of the earthquake, feel lonely, anxious and depressed in the last 2 years. Therefore, psychology students from the Faculty of Philosophy, wanted to raise awareness with the project of psycho walks in the metropolis. The project runs with the cooperation of tourist guides and activities include walks around the city with local stories which helps with motivating the participants to develop psychological resistance, optimism, openness and acceptance. By meeting new people, loneliness can be reduced which many people experience.
As well as this, the association also organises other activities such as individual and group counselling, provides individual support and organises workshops on different topics, etc.[51]

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[49] https://docs.iza.org/dp14245.pdf

[50] 'Loneliness in the EU – Insights from surveys and online media data', Joint Research Centre, 2021.

[51] https://www.kakosi.hr/

Helpline for youth during the pandemic
The Central State Office for Demography and Youth and the Croatian Psychological Chamber launched telephone lines for psychological counselling of young people and for support during the pandemic. At this time, young people faced frustration due to the limitation of social contacts and not being able to go out. They also experienced feelings of loneliness, they were concerned about the end of the school year and graduation, experienced an excessive degree of criticism from adults in relation to the responsibility of young people and also had fear of infection for their family members. The helpline was initiated in all of the 20 Croatian counties and the City of Zagreb.

3.7. BULGARIA

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

The current volunteering landscape in Bulgaria has been created over the last three decades since the fall of communism through a very volatile political and social-economic landscape. Volunteering is still a new concept for Bulgarian society although there has been a tangible change over the last two decades and currently much more people have been attracted to the values of volunteering.

According to research done on the 'Attitudes of the Society towards the Civil Sector', 8% of the population volunteered in 2020. As the government has not commissioned any in depth research, there is a lack of data on volunteering in Bulgaria. However, the attitudes on volunteering in Bulgarian society have played a huge role in the way volunteering organisations work and have created limits and challenges for them.

Volunteering landscape

1. Politically and socially unfriendly environment for civil society organisations
The civil society organisations in Bulgaria have been working in a politically unfriendly environment over the last couple of years. This is due to several events starting in 2019 with the withdrawal of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. This was viewed by some nationalist political parties as a loss to the Bulgarian society action, lobbied for by NGOs. Although the Convention was never ratified, it sparked a lot of protests and attitudes towards the civil society organisations as 'foreign agents working against Bulgarian interests'. This led to the withdrawal of the Draft Children's Strategy and created a proposal for amendments in the legislation limiting the CSOs' freedoms, preventing and disturbing their work.

Fortunately, there's been a change in the political scenery since Bulgaria held general elections in April 2021 and although a new cabinet hasn't yet been formed, the nationalist parties, hostile to the NGOs, didn't make it to parliament. However, the image of volunteering in Bulgaria is still not attractive, particularly to the older generation. This is rooted in historical reasons, namely that volunteer labour during the communist times was more like a forced activity in public benefit than an act of selflessness and good will that we know today.
More or less, volunteering is seen nowadays as an 'elite' activity and is deemed to be practised by people with too much free time on their hands or by those who do not face any personal or professional difficulties and are therefore free to dedicate their spare time to a cause.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, there's been a change and the number of people volunteering is rising. Volunteering is now promoted more often and is becoming more popular especially amongst young people.

2. The profile of the volunteer in Bulgaria: Young and educated

Due to the fact that young people don't tend to hold the negative view around volunteering as their parents combined with the fact that they possess more free time, the majority of volunteers in Bulgaria are young people with the following characteristics:

● Young people aged between 15 and 30 made up 32% of the volunteer force in 2002
● Usually coming from economically stable background
● Well-educated - volunteers are typically students in prestigious high schools or have graduated from them. 27% of volunteers have a high school diploma and 56% hold a university degree
● There are more female volunteers than male. In 2002 69% of those who said they volunteered were women

Adults, whole families or pensioners also volunteer but these cases are rarer. 95% of volunteers are part of non-governmental organisations, including community centres. The remaining 5% volunteer at state and municipal structures, schools, and kindergartens. According to the survey 'Young Volunteers in Bulgaria' conducted in 2010, 54% of the young people aged 14-17 who volunteered, did it incidentally, whilst of those aged 18-29 only 29% volunteered spontaneously and just once. 5% of those aged 14-17 volunteered between 1 and 3 weeks a year and 10% of those aged 18-19 spent the same amount of time volunteering.

3. Lack of legal framework and sustainable funding

The lack of a legislative framework regulating the relations between a volunteer and their organisation is making it hard for many organisations to work with volunteers as they do not have established unified quality standards to comply with and are forced to work with internal organisational standards, if any. There is no sustainable state funding provided for volunteering and voluntary organisations. All voluntary organisations in Bulgaria are only able to operate by project writing and applying to a number of different national, European and international donors in order to provide short- term funding.

Over the last couple of years, thanks to the launching of the European Solidarity Corps, the Bulgarian voluntary organisations have access to long-term EU funding for their local activities. Applying for projects under volunteer activities and volunteer partnerships, part of the latest program of the EU, is at this time the only option they have to obtain somewhat long-term funding. Still, it is limiting for several reasons. Firstly, it only supports volunteers aged 18-30/35. Also, in some cases (according to the latest amendments for the 2021-2027 period), only accredited organisations are eligible to apply and although there is an option to apply for local activities in Bulgarian to the National Agency, the European Solidarity Corps Guidelines have not been translated from English to Bulgarian. In practice this limits the organisations whose staff are not strong English speakers access to these funds.

4. Volunteering and the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the COVID-19 pandemic the image of volunteering has significantly improved- more people are volunteering and more are willing to volunteer. According to research conducted by the Bulgarian Centre for Non-for-Profit Law in 2020, on Attitudes of Society towards CSOs, the trust in non-governmental organisations rose to 31.1% compared to 24.7% in 2018. As reported by the same research, 8% of the population volunteered in 2020, compared to around 6% for the previous years. Voluntary actions were, and continue to be, covered on national media, including on the biggest national TV broadcasters as well as on platforms dedicated to good news and positive examples. Society has become more aware of the significance of volunteering - at least at times of crisis.

Legal Framework

There is no law exclusively dedicated to regulating volunteering in Bulgaria. In 2006, a Law on Volunteering, aligned with European legislation in this area was drafted by the Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and a number of voluntary organisations, but it has not been passed by parliament to date.

The Draft Law on Volunteering (2006) provides a stepping stone for developing a legal base for volunteering. The former sets out such essential aspects as definitions of the terms volunteer and volunteering, the principles on which volunteering is based and the relation of the state towards this type of activity, as well as the legal status, rights and duties of volunteers.

The Law on Youth, adopted in 2012, provides a definition of youth volunteering and information on the obligations of voluntary youth organisations towards their young volunteers in matters such as safety, training and registration etc. Under the Law, the definition of a young person is an individual aged between 15 and 29. The Law regulates the obligations and rights of all young volunteers practising in Bulgaria, both local and foreign.

In particular, through the Draft Law on Volunteering, the following basic principles of volunteering would be regulated:
● The legal status of 'voluntary organisation', 'voluntary activity' and 'volunteer' will be defined.
● Provisions regulating the participation of volunteers will be introduced - Bulgarian citizens, volunteers (citizens of EU member states and volunteers), citizens of less developed countries.
● The organisations that have the right to carry out voluntary activity will be determined.
● The types of volunteering will be defined e.g. short-term, long-term, corporate.
● A requirement for a written contract for long-term volunteering will be introduced. It is envisaged that the Ministry of Justice will maintain a public register of persons organising voluntary activities on its website.
● It will be mandatory to issue an identification card to a volunteer through which the volunteer identifies himself.

Attempts to pass the Law have been made in the last four National Assemblies (2006 - 2017). Thus, several drafts have been introduced by different political parties, coalitions and the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria. The last bill was introduced to the National Assembly on 14th of December 2017 by a group of MPs for consideration and voting in accordance with the relevant procedures but hasn't been adopted yet due to contradictions in the views of the different political parties and lack of clarity about the administrative body which should take charge of the law.

The Law on Youth states that:
● The Minister of Youth and Sports encourages youth volunteering.
● Youth volunteering is an activity in public benefit, carried out without remuneration by young people in Bulgaria, or other countries, under programs and initiatives in the field of social, youth, sports and other socially significant activities.
● The state and the municipalities encourage young voluntary activities through national and regional youth programs.
● Youth voluntary activities are based on principles of; free choice, gratuitousness, personal responsibility, equality and with respect to the life, health and dignity of the volunteer.
The role of youth volunteering is recognised in the National Youth Strategy for 2010-2020 and in the Draft National Youth Strategy 2020-2030. The latter identifies several strategic priorities regarding youth volunteering:

● Creating and promoting more voluntary opportunities for young people with a focus on the European Solidarity Corps.
● Encouraging young people to initiate their own volunteer activities.
● Recognising and validating the skills acquired during volunteering.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

The social exclusion of a large part of young people in Bulgaria is a problem at a national level, which affects all spheres of social and economic life. In response to this, the research project, 'Children - authors of their lives', run by the Association for Pedagogical and Social Assistance for Children 'FICE Bulgaria', and the Foundation ' Hope for us' identified factors to support the process of inclusion of young people. These included; state policies, economic conditions of the target group, the opportunities for participation in the creation of youth policies and the opportunities of the labour market in the European Union. Recommendations were made to reduce the negative factors influencing the conditions of youth social exclusion to help stakeholders find workable solutions to the problem.

The factors that lead to social exclusion of young people are heterogeneous. Their identification is essential for understanding the problems with youth participation in Bulgaria. On the one hand, there are personal factors that are associated with the individual attitude and low motivation for active participation in the political and economic life and on the other - they are related to the lack of opportunities for this type of participation.

3.8. PORTUGAL

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

There is no legislation in force regarding youth volunteering in Portugal. Volunteering activities are established within the law number 71/98 of the 3rd of November 1998 which defines the concept of the volunteer, hosting institutions, and the rights and duties of the volunteer.
The governmental body that regulates youth volunteering can be found under the office of youth politics (https://programas.juventude.gov.pt/agora-nos). This is a state operated platform that links candidates to opportunities, as well as being an intermediary between parts.
The Portuguese Institute for Youth and Sports (https://ipdj.gov.pt/voluntariado) offers the same opportunities. The remaining institutions engaged in youth volunteering are either part of the private sector or under non-governmental organisations.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

There are no specific programmes in place to tackle loneliness and exclusion in Portugal. The Institute of Sport and Youth has a web page on mental health, isolation and loneliness but does not present a project in which young people can participate to mitigate these problems, instead, it refers the youth the the website of youth health and mental health.

This is not the case for exclusion, where a few projects can be found. It is the case of the Project '' Bora Jovens'' that promotes inclusion for employability for young people at risk of social exclusion. It provides training and development of skills to help this group to achieve their potential. https://ajudaemacao.org/projetos-solidarios-em-portugal-bora-jovens/

Another project, 'INCORPORA', helps young people at risk of social exclusion by promoting work inclusion. It targets victims of domestic violence, people who have been to jail, young NEET (young people who are not engaged in studies or employment) or long term unemployed people.
https://www.fjuventude.pt/pt/projetos/em-parceria/projeto-incorpora

This research indicates that the offer on fighting exclusion, loneliness and isolation is not very differentiated in the country and has mostly a focus on employment.

Relevant national research on the topic

As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic had numerous consequences regarding youth and mental health. For example, many schools closed and teaching had to be converted through digital methods. This changed sociabilities and interaction dynamics, which greatly affected youth and the opportunities they have to interact and socialise, as school is a structural part of youth's routines. Such aspects deeply affect loneliness and isolation in youth. Another aspect to consider in this conversion of traditional teaching to digital methods is that it reinforces existing inequalities among students, contributing to exclusion. To be able to keep up with these, students would have to have preexisting conditions, such as access to the internet and computers in good conditions, which wasn't the case of many young people and children, as mentioned by Diário de Notícias. According to them, 20% of the children didn't have adequate access to online classes. All this has earnest consequences not only on their overall school percussion, but also on their future employability opportunities, since school is an important pathway to acquire skills and knowledge which are valued in the labour market. As Diário de Notícias mentioned, there is a bigger probability (78%) of school failure among these children.

Plus, according to the Portugal's Poverty and Social Exclusion Report (2020), children and young people are one of the most vulnerable groups when it comes to poverty and overall social exclusion, meaning that it's very likely that they'll feel the effects of loneliness with greater emphasis.

There is not much data available of loneliness affecting young people in Portugal, although there is a study by the European Union which tackles the matter. Loneliness doubled in the European Union (EU) between April and July 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, with Portugal being the sixth European country with the highest increase, according to a study by the European Commission released on 26 July. "There was a quadruple of loneliness among young people aged 18-35 compared to 2016", adds the European Commission in the press release. In the report, seen by Lusa, the CCI of the European Commission observes that "loneliness increased by more than 15 percentage points in Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal and Sweden". Specifically, the percentage of respondents in Portugal who said they felt alone more than half the time in the two weeks prior to the interview rose from 6.6 percent in 2016 (pre-pandemic levels) to 21.9 percent in 2020 (during pandemic). With a difference of 15.3 percentage points, Portugal was the sixth country in the EU with the highest increase. Study available here.

Best practices

Ajuda de Berço

Shelters children from 0 to 3 years old, in need of urgent protection, in case of situations such as mistreatment, sexual abuse, alcoholic parents or drug addicts, prostitution, homelessness or abandonment.

Associação Coração Amarelo

Volunteer based organization tackling social isolation and loneliness amongst the Portuguese elderly.

Associação Amigos Improváveis

Helps to end the loneliness among the elderly. It was founded in 2014 with the aim of restoring good neighbourly relations and bringing generations together.

Pista Mágica - Associação

Pista Mágica is a non-profit association, recognised as a Non-Governmental Development Organisation (NGDO) that **believes in the vast potential of volunteering and active citizenship as ways to transform society.** Being the first Volunteer School in Portugal, launched in July 2008, it is a social innovation project, composed of elements with extensive experience and skills in the area of complementary universes and common values. Pista Mágica seeks to reinvent themselves and, today, they are not only a School, but also an organisation ready to operationalise and manage volunteer programmes.

As such, and given nowadays context, Pista Mágica has shaped two important projects which directly tackle Covid-19 Pandemic effects in youth: **VES - Social Emergency Volunteering** and **V17** - **Volunteering Without Borders**.

VES - Social Emergency Volunteering is a project which aims to mitigate the social exclusion generated or aggravated by the COVID-19 Pandemic in five portuguese municipalities: Amarante, Braga, Esposende, Guimarães and Vila Verde. To perform this, Pista Mágica aids these five municipalities into creating a group of volunteers who are ready to act in extreme situations of social exclusion, as it's the example of isolated elderly people.

V17 - **Volunteering Without Borders** is an initiative which acts within the whole area of the Metropolitan Oporto. As such, it's an initiative which involves seventeen municipalities: Arouca, Espinho, Gondomar, Maia, Matosinhos, Oliveira de Azeméis, Paredes, Porto, Póvoa de Varzim, São João da Madeira, Santa Maria da Feira, Santo Tirso, Trofa, Vale de Cambra, Valongo, Vila do Conde and Vila Nova de Gaia. Its main aim is to also mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic and it focuses on three main aspects: improvement of mental health; creation of a metropolitan volunteering academy for young people; and use of proximity volunteering in order to tackle social exclusion.

SOS Voz Amiga

Gives emotional support by telephone to all those who are in situations of loneliness, anxiety, depression or risk of suicide.

Youtube mini series about loneliness in Portugal.

Composed of six episodes, the 'Luzes com Presença' mini webseries documentary, available on YouTube, shows the testimonies of those who suffer from loneliness and social isolation in Portugal, and the work done by the institutions and volunteers who accompany them. From a village with 19 inhabitants all the way to Greater Porto, the episodes, of about 3 and a half minutes each, show that this phenomenon does not choose geography, age or social status, but there are those who are attentive and dedicated to reversing the scenario. Available here.

3.9. FRANCE

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

In France there is no official definition of volunteering. However, the most common definition in contained in a report of the French Social and Economic Council from 1993, 'The volunteer (bénévole) is a person who engages freely to carry out an action for the benefit of others, without remuneration and not subject to obligations under a law, outside of one's work and family time'.

There are two major concepts to volunteering:
● The concept of 'Volontariat' identifies four different forms of volunteer services; international volunteering, military volunteering, civil service, and fire service. These services are voluntary, but entail the payment of a stipend and benefits in kind. Specific laws and regulations provide a framework for these forms of volunteering giving them also a formal legal status.
● The concept of 'Bénévolat' identifies persons who engage voluntarily in altruistic activities without any financial retribution or material benefits. Bénévoles have no formal legal status, although their activities are ruled by a series of legal regulations. For the purpose of this research we will consider the concept of 'bénévolat'.

The State Secretary of Social and Solidarity Economy (Secretariat d'Etat chargé de l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire et de la Vie Associative) manages files that are related to 'bénévolat'. The main reference document is the 'Guide du Benevole', (2018 -2019) which contains the guiding principles for volunteers, namely:
● Volunteers' rights
● Support mechanisms for volunteers
● Volunteers' training

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

Local level
In Grenoble, the Programme Parrainage solidaire is 'solidarity mentorship'. This is an initiative to fight the isolation students and young people may experience. Its aim is to create reciprocity and solidarity by connecting students/young people with families and people of Grenoble who want to spend time together, go on walks, outings, talk on the phone etc. in a friendly atmosphere. The goal is to break the isolation of students and young people who were, and still are, specifically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

National level
The Astrée Association (recognised as the association of public utility by decree 4/06/2015), fights against isolation by helping to restore social ties and the well-being of people in situations of social and/or personal fragility. The Association created the programme 'Attentive to Others' consisting of two highlights:
● Raising awareness of the need to listen and pay attention to others
● Setting up a system of support for young people in difficulty and under risk of isolation
Vulnerable students are supported by other student volunteers (the 'Bénévoles') who help with challenging situations such as breakups and loneliness whilst also helping to prevent harassment, restore self-confidence, and improve relationships with others and ultimately, the prevention of dropping out of school.
Relevant national research on the topic

The 'Barometre des Solitudes 2021' is focused specifically on the isolation of youth. This research found that one young person in five experiences isolation. Young people stated that they need social interactions and felt that digital tools such as social media did not help to relieve loneliness in any way.

The Barometre also highlights a considerable increase in isolation; 54% of people are isolated or have only one social network/social ties, which makes them very vulnerable. 24% of the population in France was found to be in relational isolation, which represents an increase of 10% compared to January 2020. The health restrictions in particular may have a bearing factor in this.

The sociability of young people has been strongly tested by Covid. The pandemic has resulted in a narrowing of young people's social networks, which has reinforced their feeling of loneliness. 33% of young people express a feeling of loneliness compared to 14% among those aged 60 and over. This feeling has increased by 5% in one year, while it remains stable for the rest of the population (21%).

21% of 15–30 year olds are in isolation (up 9% in one year) and only 46% have maintained regular contact with family or friends. Young people have reduced their contact with all their networks; friends (-17% between 2020 and 2021), family (-14%), associative (- 4%), and professional (-3%). Only neighbourhood contacts experienced growth (+ 4%).

More worryingly, young people are the most likely among the French population to have a feeling of abandonment, exclusion, or uselessness (54% vs. 35% for the general average). Isolated youths face more difficulties than other isolated people in terms of finances, employment and housing. These difficulties were amplified by the shutdown of a large part of the economy in 2020, with jobs for youth particularly affected.

Best practices

The Fondation de France, among others in France, fights against isolation and engages in revitalising social channels. It does so by addressing the main factors that can exacerbate isolation such as housing, mobility, integration for people with foreign origins, the creation of meeting hubs, inequalities in the access of digital technology. In doing so they are also avoiding young people dropping out of school.

Out of 10,000 projects, 3500 are focused on young people, in the following areas:

● LISTENING: Association 'Héka (Chinon)' offers support to young people suffering from psychiatric problems, related to lack of family or social ties, using art as a therapeutic tool.

● LINK and GATHER: 'K-fé (Nord Isère)' offers a space for vulnerable young and elderly people to meet, exchange and share knowledge.

● JOIN: The 'Association 4,3,2 (Hautes-Alpes)' supports young people living in rural areas. Volunteers from the Association visit the most remote areas, not usually covered by social assistance to prevent isolation and juvenile delinquency. Around 150 young people are supported at this time.

● PARTICIPATE: Action across the Country to fight against school dropouts. In Les and Lille there are schools welcoming young people who are unable to integrate in the usual school system and are under risk of isolation.

3.10. SPAIN

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

The new Volunteering Law (BOE October 15, 2015)[52] is committed to open, participatory and intergenerational volunteering. It also focuses on the importance of the free and selfless dedication of time, the skills and knowledge of volunteers, as well as the social and personal transformation that volunteering involves. It covers a voluntary action without connotations, without excluding, and states that it can be promoted not only in the Third Sector, but in other more innovative areas, such as corporates, universities or public administrations themselves.

Likewise, the new forms of volunteering that have emerged in recent years are valued and recognised. This includes those that become concrete actions and run for a certain period of time, without having to be integrated into global or long-term programs. Also, those that are carried out by volunteers through information and communication technologies and that do not require the physical presence of volunteers.

The new law regulates aspects such as access to volunteering. This is limited to prevent those convicted of human trafficking, gender-based violence, domestic violence or terrorism from participating in projects, especially those that may have vulnerable beneficiaries such as minors, families and women. This law also incorporated the recognition and accreditation of competencies obtained in volunteering as a right of volunteers.

Also stated, is the introduction of a minimum age limit of 12 years to become a volunteer, (with the consent of parents or legal tutors), equal access to volunteering for people with disabilities, and also determines that discriminatory practices based on identity and sexual orientation are not accepted.

Also, the administration will favour employees who adapt or reduce their working hours to carry out volunteer activities and as such involve corporates and universities as active participants. In the case of universities, the Law states that they may develop ways for the academic recognition of volunteering. In addition, it is expressly stated that if a person is volunteering, this can never be the cause for the termination of a contract or the reduction of employment hours.

Likewise, the Law outlines the various areas of voluntary actions as; social, international development cooperation, environmental, educational, social-health, cultural, sports, leisure and free time, community and civil protection (such as that from an emergency or natural disaster). Also, paralympic volunteering is added within the sports category and animal protection within the environmental category.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

Barcelona contra la soledad: Consejo Asesor Científico contra la Soledad (CACS)/Scientific Advisory Council against Loneliness
The 'Scientific Advisory Council against Loneliness (CACS)' is made up of experts from various disciplines in the academic and scientific fields. This allows the issue of loneliness to be addressed from a variety of aspects and at all stages of the life cycle with constant innovation and research.

The objective of the 'Scientific Advisory Council against Loneliness (CACS)' is to become a space for debate, reflection, advice and monitoring of the 'Municipal Strategy against Loneliness 2020-2030'.

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[52] Law 45/2015, on Volunteering. State official newsletter. No. 247 (October 15, 2015), p. 1-20

Community of Castilla and León

A new focus on interventions and keys for strategic planning in the face of loneliness[53]

A loneliness strategy must start with the idea that it is normal. Loneliness is something that we all feel and situations in which all people will find themselves at some point. Therefore, resources and opportunities must be distributed among citizens equally among the entire population.

Prevention is preferable. If we act early, we avoid suffering. Preferably, we need to do primary prevention that supports the entire population, second, those at risk and third, people who are lonely.

Loneliness is something both common and individual to each person. We need to personalise, respect and promote the life experience of each person, promoting their self-determination and empowering people to face loneliness based on their own preferences.

A loneliness strategy cannot happen without community focus, or talking about bonds, without support, primary relationships, families, neighbours, or identity. Ultimately, a loneliness strategy cannot happen without building community.

A loneliness strategy must be ambitious but also sustainable over time. Perhaps we can talk about transforming physical spaces through which people travel or we can raise awareness whilst mobilising and promoting volunteering. We can think about ways of community coexistence and collaboration, accompanying people's life plans with possible new coexistence solutions. Consideration must be given to the digital divide, corporates and new governance. Finally, we need to build loneliness strategies from public conversations that motivate and mobilise and that serve to transform society.

Relevant national research on the topic

In the collective consciousness, people believe that loneliness only occurs in adults, however, the pandemic revealed a phenomenon that experts had already been observing, the fact that young people increasingly feel alone. This analysis was complex as a result of the factors and causes being many and varied.

During the pandemic in the Community of Madrid, 31% of young people under 30 years of age, declared feeling lonely. This is compared to 14.7% of people over 60 and 18% between 30 and 60 years old.

This data is part of the Spain 2020 Report, prepared by José María Martín Patino Chair of the Culture of the Meeting of the Comillas Pontifical University[54].

A survey conducted in 2019 by DYM Market Research stated that the perception of loneliness by young people is growing amongst those who have a university education (67.1%).

This growth may be related to the move away from their home city or country of origin to other places where employment prospects are more likely,

In this latest study, social networks are referred to as the cause of this loneliness and it is stated that those who experience it the most, are actually those who use them the most.

Graph 3A- Percentage of people with social loneliness based on their age. Blue=Men, Pink=Women

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[53] https://www.jcyl.es/junta/cp/202010923-plan-estrategico-soledad.pdf, (page 55-60)

[54] Spanish Report 2020, José María Martín Patino, Comillas Pontifical University, 2020, p. 103 https://blogs.comillas.edu/informeespana/informe-espana-2020/

Graph 3B- Percentage of people with emotional loneliness based on their age. Blue=Men, Pink=Women

Gráfico 3A – Porcentaje de personas con soledad social según la edad

Gráfico 3B - Porcentaje de personas con soledad emocional según la edad
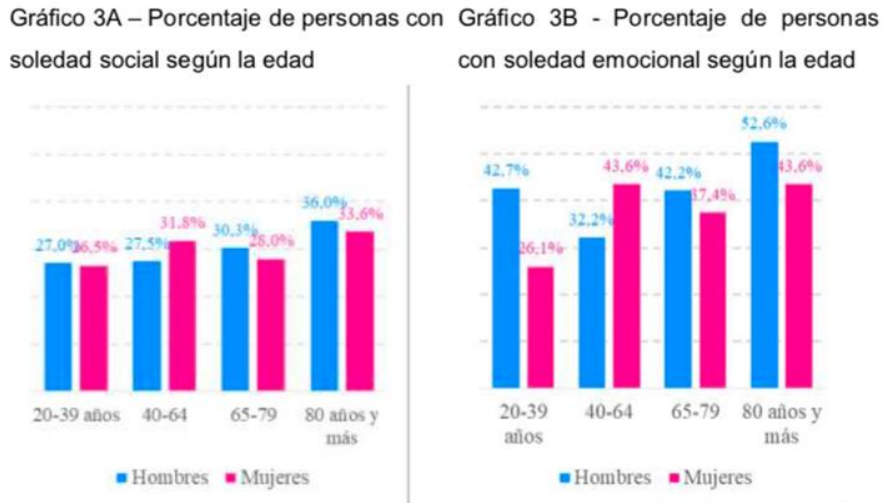
Best practices

Volunteers for Madrid

This organisation develops volunteer projects of general interest. This includes permanent projects carried out throughout the year with numerous volunteers participating, and others that are carried out on an occasional basis, generally once a year, and allow the participation of people who are usually not available to carry out long term volunteering.

Project 'MADRID ACCOMPANIES YOU' is a team of volunteers that accompany those in situations of need, through a direct and very easy-to-use tool, a mobile phone application (APP), called 'MADRID, accompanies you'.

NGO Great Friends

This volunteer organisation has a presence in all the districts of Madrid and is dedicated to preventing and alleviating the loneliness of the elderly. This is achieved by providing meaningful company at home and in other residences, both in person and by telephone. This helps create bonds of friendship, affection and mutual support between older people and volunteers of any age. https://grandesamigos.org/what-we-do/

They also provide leisure and socialisation activities where people expand their friendship network by participating together with other older people and volunteers by sharing food, holding neighbourhood meetings, workshops, socio-cultural visits, adapted holidays, etc. https://grandesamigos.org/what-we-do/

'Great Neighbours' prevents loneliness through the recovery of neighbourhood relationships between older people and neighbourhood residents. www.grandesvecinos.org

Lastly, 'Neighbouring Madrid' is a network for the detection and prevention of loneliness in the elderly, that involves local shops, pharmacies, public resources, associations and neighbourhood residents all with the support of the Madrid City Council. www.madridvecina.org

Solidarity for Development

The 'Solidarity for Development' programme provides company at home to elderly people who are experiencing loneliness. It also carries out an intergenerational coexistence program, an intergenerational and supportive

initiative, based on the coexistence of lonely elderly people and students from public universities. The student, while progressing in his studies, shares his life, whilst living, in the home of the elderly person. This is not only a companionship and human support program, but also implies an experience of mutual enrichment, shared learning and openness to new relationships for both parties and as such the growing issue of loneliness within younger generations can also be tackled.

3.11. ITALY

Legal environment for volunteering and youth

The 266/1991 law[55] represents the legal framework for volunteering in Italy. Within this, the Italian Republic recognises the social value and the function of volunteering as an expression of participation, solidarity and pluralism. It promotes its development, safeguarding its autonomy, and favouring its social, cultural and civil purposes. The law states the principles that the Italian regions and the autonomous provinces have regarding the regulation of relationships between the public institutions and volunteering organisations.

According to the Constitution, art. 31[56], the Italian Republic protects young people by ensuring the necessary institutions are available to do so. Youth policy is a concurrence competence, which means that the legislative power on this matter is both in the hands of the central government, the regions and the autonomous provinces, while the fundamental principles are established by the Constitution.

Third sector and youth organisations are involved with implementing volunteering, though it is necessary to remember that at the national level, Italy still lacks a basic youth law and not every region has adopted a regional legislation on youth policies (at the present time, only four regions out of twenty have done so).

The Department for Youth Policies and Universal Social Service is part of the Ministry for Sport and Youth Policies. This body promotes the management of youth policies from the government and manages the Universal Civil Service programme. Additionally, there is a legal body, called Unified Conference, that supports dialogue on youth policies between the national government, the regions, the autonomous provinces and the municipalities.

Relevant policies tackling loneliness and isolation and exclusion of youth

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian government, regions and autonomous provinces have shown concern regarding the problem of loneliness and exclusion of youths. At the same time however, measures to tackle mental issues directly were low and insufficient.
For example, the Italian government introduced the 'psychological bonus' in July 2022. This was a contribution to support the costs of psychotherapy sessions for people who may need them after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the bonus was not intended only for young people and it was designed for those on low-incomes.

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[55] Framework Law on Volunteering, 22 August 1991, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1991/08/22/091G0313/sg
[56] Article 31, Italian Constitution, 22 December 1947, *The Republic shall, through economic measures and other benefits, encourage the creation of families and the fulfilment of corresponding duties, with special regard to large families. The Republic shall protect mothers, children and the young, favouring the institutions that are necessary to that end*, shorturl.at/diDVY

Data shows that out of the 300,000 requests, 60% of the applications were from young people under the age of 35 and only 10% of the total candidates actually received the bonus due to the limited budget allocated by the government.

Moreover, the 2021 'Recovery and Resilience Plan' as part of Next Generation EU programme, which aims to relaunch the Italian economy after the pandemic crisis, fails to place a high priority on youth mental issues connected to the pandemic. It only states that it is recommended, not compulsory, for community houses and medical facilities to have mental health specialists. Because of this, services are not equal and are dependent as to whether the hospital applies the plan or not.

Even on mental health issues and policies for youths, the national and regional levels still lack an effective system. There have been several diverse programmes adopted to avoid youth exclusion. For instance, 'Giovani 2030' (Youth 2030) is a platform for young people aged between 14 and 35 and was created in 2021 by the Department for Youth Policies and Universal Social Service. This aims to provide useful information regarding opportunities for youths offered by public institutions, universities, third-sector entities and associations. Furthermore, the Italian Universal Civil Service has been recognised in Europe as an example of good practice by involving youngsters in active citizenship since 2001.

Relevant national research on the topic

According to the report 'Pandemic, Youth Unease and NEET', published by the Ministry of Youth Policies in October 2021, young people were among the most affected categories of the population due to the COVID-19 pandemic related restriction measures. Youths suffered from physical and mental disorders, such as sleeping problems, anxiety attacks and irritability. In addition to this, suicide attempts and self-harm have increased by 30%.

The 2021 ISTAT Annual Report shows that Italy had the highest ever level of NEETs (Not Engaged in Education, Employment or Training) in 2020. NEETs reached approximately 2.1 units with an unbalanced distribution in the country: 16.8% in the North, 19.9% in the Centre and 32.6% in the South.

Another relevant issue is represented by ELETs (Early Leavers from Education and Training) who, in 2020, amounted to 543,000 of which 46.6% lived in the South of Italy. Against this backdrop, the lockdown policies due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of future perspectives heightened the feelings of isolation in many young people. We can also take into consideration the survey, 'Gli italiani e la solitudine' (Italians and loneliness), made by 'Il Sole 24 Ore' in October 2020, who found that 32% of the respondents that said they often feel lonely were aged between 18 and 34 years.

Best practices

'Charlie Friend Telephone' and 'Charlie Planet' are services offered by the Charlie Foundation Onlus, founded in 1997 in Pisa to help young people deal with loneliness and anxiety. 'Charlie Friend Telephone' is an anonymous telephone helpline while 'Charlie Planet' is an online platform where young people can chat with mental health specialists and receive advice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these services were proved to be useful for the Italian teenagers who suffered from mental disorders.

Another example of good practice is represented by the YOUZ Regional Forum. A participatory survey was conducted among more than 2,000 people aged under 35 living in the Emilia-Romagna region between June and November 2021. The respondents were asked to identify the strategic priorities on which the regional administration should implement significant political changes. The proposals put forward by the young participants have been grouped into four strategic areas of intervention, one of which has been named 'psychological support'. This includes recommendations related to tackling the effect of lockdown and social distancing measures on young people. As of the end of 2022, it is important to note that the regional administration decided to allocate an initial amount of 2.2 million euros in public expenditure in order to create and run specific public policies in this field. This was followed by a promise to increase this amount to 3.6 million euros by 2024.

(https://notizie.regione.emilia-romagna.it/comunicati/2022/febbraio/giovani-ecco-il-decalogo-youz-le-dieci-proposte-di-ragazze-e-ragazzi-che-la-regione-si-impegna-a-realizzare-bonaccini-e-schlein-201cun-ribaltamento-di-paradigma-impostiamo-le-politiche-giovanili-partendo-dall2019ascolto-delle-loro-idee-per-rendere;
https://buonenotiziebologna.it/primo-piano/dal-territorio/5468-emilia-romagna-vicino-alle-giovani-generazioni)

3.12. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM NATIONAL DESK RESEARCH

Legal framework for volunteering and youth

On the EU level in Europe, no unique, overriding legal framework for volunteering or youths exists, however, there are some strategies and recommendations that promote and support volunteering in this field. There are also differences within the member countries. While some countries have adopted specific legal frameworks for volunteering, for example Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Croatia all have a law on volunteering, other countries such as France and Portugal have volunteering and its significant terms associated with other laws. The remaining members, Ireland, Denmark and Germany, lean on the long tradition of volunteering and active citizen participation and function very well without the law on volunteering. Germany does however have a law on the federal level and Bulgaria, despite having a draft law since 2006 are yet to adopt it. Although not having a law, it is worth mentioning that Denmark, Ireland and Slovenia have national strategies/programmes aimed at volunteering development.

In most of the partner countries except Croatia, there is no specific governmental body responsible for volunteering. Volunteering has been present in different areas of policies and represented in different ministries and state offices.

National policies tackling loneliness, isolation and social exclusion of youth

None of the partner countries involved in the project have a specific national strategy or plan to combat loneliness. However, Denmark has had a recommendation to adopt a National strategy to combat loneliness since 2021. Similar to Denmark, there are other local initiatives and recommendations for developing strategies in combating loneliness in the partner countries, but these are on a local level (municipality) as opposed to national. In other countries, the topic of loneliness, isolation and social exclusion are represented in plans and programmes, aimed at combating social exclusion or dealing with mental health issues.

National research on the topic

All countries have conducted different research on loneliness and mental health. Almost all of the research reports a higher percentage of people feeling lonely especially during and after the pandemic. In almost all countries, this percentage has been much higher among the youth and there is a growing awareness of loneliness as an issue and 'new pandemic', especially among young people.

Best practices

In all partner countries, there are good examples of best practice in civil society organisations when it comes to providing support to young people feeling lonely, isolated and thus socially excluded. However, when it comes to involving these youth through volunteering, we can say that in most of the countries there is not a specific focus on how to engage youths feeling lonely and isolated in volunteering. Most of the best practices come from individual projects implemented by non-profit organisations with the general focus on loneliness, with the inclusion of excluded youth. The existing practice shows that we still lack volunteer programmes that strategically and deliberately involve lonely young people as volunteers.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH ON EXISTING PRACTICES OF CSOS IN TACKLING LONELINESS, ISOLATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

For the purpose of this research, an online questionnaire was launched in July 2022. Its aim was to:
- Collect information on existing and potential future volunteer programmes that support young people facing loneliness, exclusion, or isolation.
- Research the capacities of organisations to develop quality volunteer programmes combating loneliness, exclusion, or isolation.
- Research the preconditions and support required to establish and develop such volunteer programmes.

The questionnaire was intended for volunteer-led and volunteering involving organisations that involve youths or work directly with youths in some areas as well as youth organisations, volunteer centres and other supporting networks and organisations.

Partners collected 231 questionnaires, 18 from Denmark, 54 from Croatia, 37 from Ireland, 23 from Germany and 99 from Slovenia.

SAMPLE OF THE RESEARCH AND SIZE AND TYPE OF ORGANISATIONS

Primary field of work

Over 50% of the organisations, who responded to the survey, stated that their primary field of work was in the social area, whilst over 30% stated they were in the field of youth work. Besides that, a certain number of organisations (over 16%) are also active in the field of humanitarian work and education, science and research. The situation is quite similar in all partner countries; however, results from Ireland demonstrated a wider variety of organisations with diverse fields of work (environmental protection, political culture, sports, culture and art, volunteering with the technology).

Primary field of work	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**17** 7,39%	**37** 16,08%	**23** 10%	**99** 43,04%	**54** 23,48%	**230** 100%
Social activity/work	16 94,12%	14 37,84%	12 52,17%	55 28%	19 46.34%	**116** **50,43%**
Humanitarian work	2	3 8,11%	3 13,04%	24 12%	7 17.07%	**39** **16,96%**
Health care	3	3 8,11%	2 8,70%	12 6%	2 4.88%	**22** **9,57%**
Sports	0	4 10,81%	3 13,04%	5 3%	1 2.44%	**13** **5,65%**
Political culture, democracy, active citizenship	0	4 10,81%	8 34,78%	7 4%	10 24.39%	**29** **12,61%**
Spirituality/religion	0	1 2,70%	0	2 1%	0	**3** **1,30%**
Culture and art	0	5 13,51%	3 13,04%	10 5%	5 12,20%	**13** **5,65%**
Human rights	0	3 8,11%	4 17,39%	16 8%	10 24,39%	**33** **14,35%**

Education, science, research	1	4 10,81%	2 8,70%	23 12%	8 19,51%	**37 16,09%**
Sustainable development	0	5 13,51%	4 17,39%	4 2%	2 4,88%	**15 6,52%**
Volunteering with technology (e.g. modelling/model making, digital, technological, computer learning, robotics and moto-nautics, etc.)	0	4 10,81%	0	0%	0	**4 1,74%**
Environmental protection and nature conservation, climate change activism	0	6 16,22%	1 4,35%	6 3%	4 9,76%	**17 7,39%**
Agriculture	0	1 2,70%	0	1 1%	1 2,44%	**3 1,30%**
Civil protection and disaster relief	0	1 2,70%	0	2 1%	2 4,88%	**5 2,17%**
Youth work	0	19 51,35%	14 60,87%	22 11%	17 41,46%	**72 31,30%**
Other areas of work (volunteer centre, peer-to-peer support, local heritage, LGBTQIA+, media education, animal protection	0	9 24,32%	1 4,35%	7 4%	1 2,44%	**18 7,83%**

Primary field of work
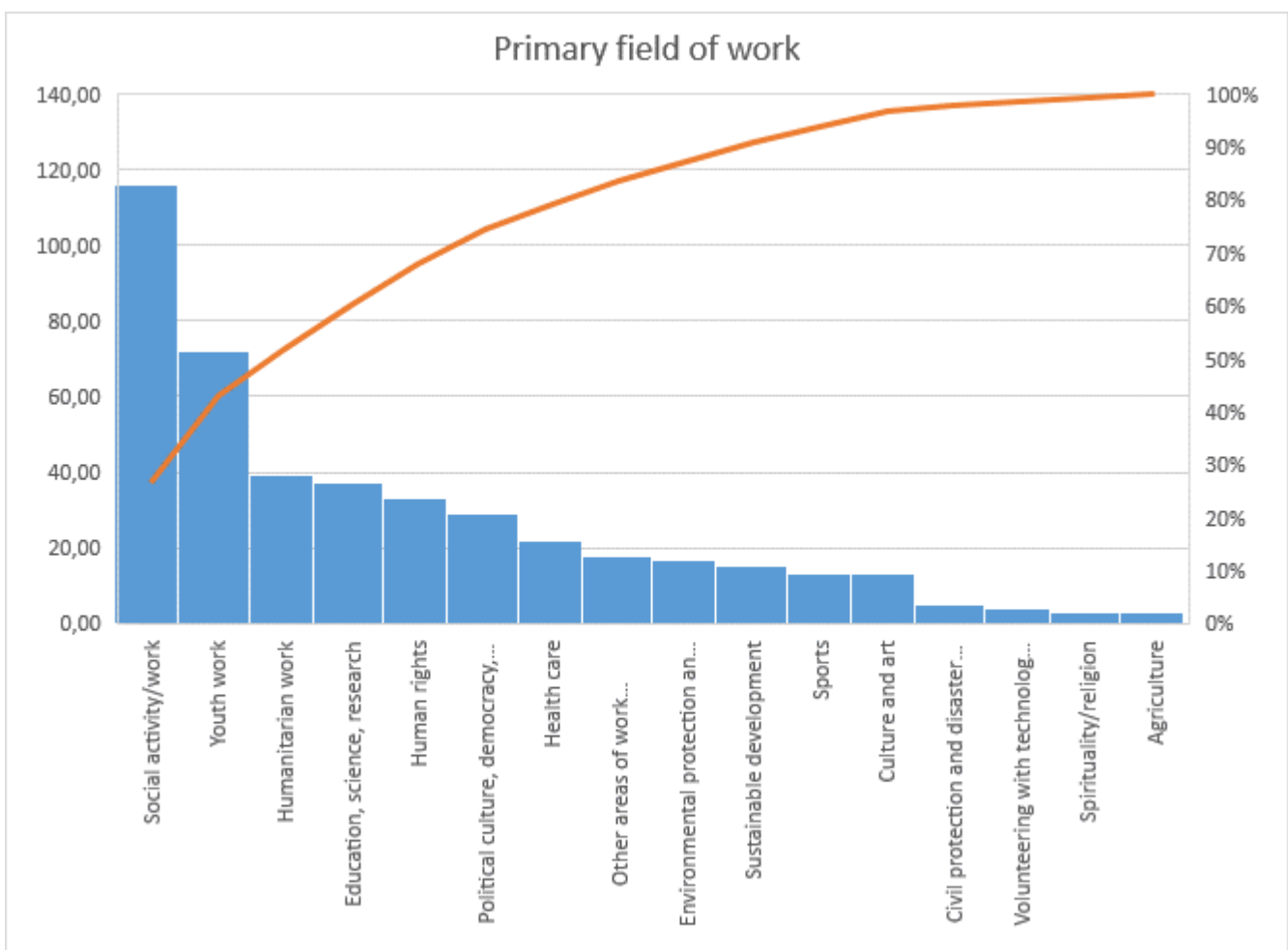
Primary activities

The most frequent primary activities of organisations involved in the research refer to social care activities, education, training and workshops at almost 50%. 30% stated events, counselling or empowerment followed by mentoring activities, and community building, also at 30%. Again, the situation is quite similar in all partner countries, except in Ireland, where over 50% of the organisations are involved in community building, events and education.

Primary activities	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**18** **7,79%**	**37** **16,09%**	**23** **9,96%**	**99** **42,86%**	**54** **23,38%**	**231** **100%**
Social care or activities	14 77,78%	13 35,14%	14 60,87%	57 18%	15 36,59%	**113** **48,92%**
Café or drop-in centre	6 33,33%	5 13,51%	5 21,74%	5 2%	5 12,20%	**26** **11,26%**
Mentor, visit friend, adult friend, peer-peer	4 22,22%	6 16,22%	2 8,70%	40 13%	11 26,83%	**63** **27,27%**
Homework support, learning assistance	2 11,11%	2 5,41%	4 17,39%	19 6%	6 14,63%	**33** **14,29%**
Store and sale or thrift shop	0	1 2,70%	0	2 1%	1 2,44%	**4** **1,73%**
Counselling or empowerment	2 11,11%	7 18,92%	9 39,13%	46 15%	13 31,71%	**77** **33,33%**
Manual work or handcraft	0	2 5,41%	0	5 2%	3 7,32%	**10** **4,33%**
Events	3 16,67%	19 51,35%	8 34,78%	28 9%	12 29,27%	**70** **30,30%**
Education, training, workshops	0	21 56,76%	10 43,48%	52 17%	24 58,54%	**107** **46,32%**
Community building	0	21 56,76%	5 21,74%	25 8%	13 31,71%	**64** **27,71%**
Advocacy (lobbying)	0	5 13,51%	2 8,70%	23 7%	12 29,27%	**42** **18,18%**
Other activities (film festivals, activities with elderly, intergenerational centres, culture, sports, local heritage, coaching athletics, team work, group work, media education, journalism, research, etc.)	2 11,11%	11 29,73%	2 8,70%	11 4%	3 7,32%	**29** **12,55%**

Primary activities
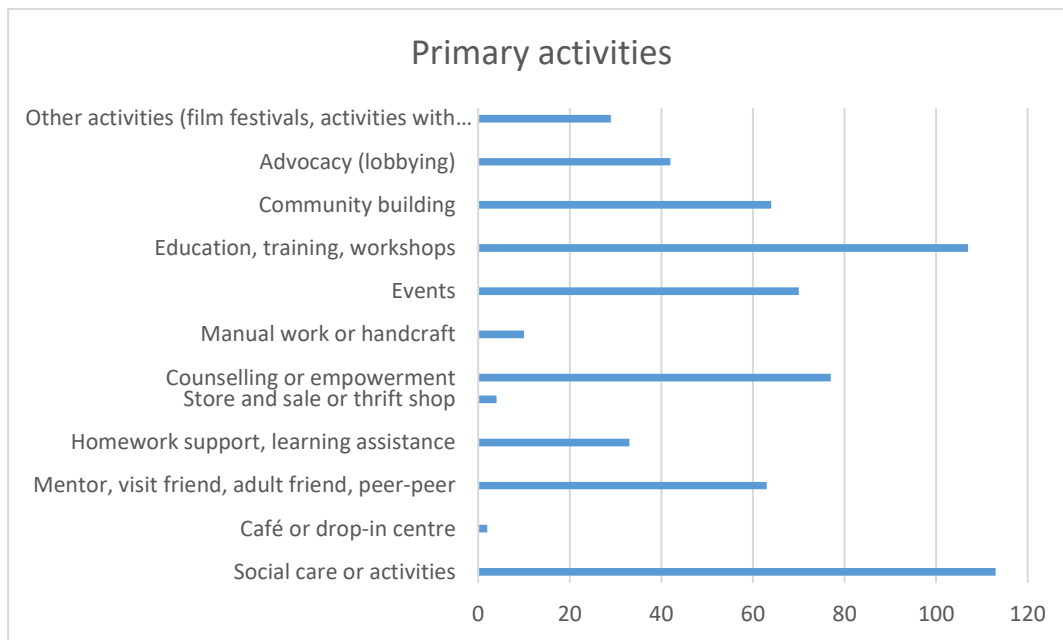
Number of employees

Almost 37% of the organisations involved in the research were considered 'larger' with over nine employees, but also over 20% of the organisations had no employees at all. The highest percentage of organisations that have no employees came from Denmark and Ireland, which are incidentally societies with a long tradition of civil society and active engagement.

Nr. of employees	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	18 8,53%	37 17,54%	23 10,90%	92 43,60%	41 19,43%	211 100%
0	6 33,33%	15 40,54%	3 13%	15 42%	5 12,20%	44 20,85%
1-2	4 22,22%	5 13,51%	3 13%	15 16%	7 17,08%	34 16,11%
3-4	3 16,67%	3 8,11%	7 30%	7 8%	5 12,20%	25 11,85%
5-6	0	2 5,41%	1 4%	9 10%	4 9,76%	16 7,58%
7-8	2 11,11%	2 5,41%	2 9%	7 8%	1 2,44%	14 6,64%
9 and above	3 16,67%	10 27,03%	7 30%	39 43%	19 46,34%	78 36,97%

Nr. of employees

- 0: 21%
- 1-2: 16%
- 3-4: 12%
- 5-6: 7%
- 7-8: 7%
- 9 and above: 37%

Number of volunteers currently involved

On average, most of the organisations involved in the research, at almost 40%, have up to 10 volunteers whilst 20% have from 10 to 20. Almost 30% of the organisations in Denmark and Ireland involve more than 200 volunteers. In Croatia, there is no single organisation involved in this research that has over 200 volunteers.

Nr. of volunteers	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	18	37	23	92	41	211
	8,53%	17,54%	10,90%	43,60%	19,43%	100%
1-10	1	14	15	42	11	83
	5,56%	37,84%	60,90%	46%	26,83%	39,34%
11-20	11	7	1	14	8	41
	31,11%	18,92%	4,30%	15%	19,51%	19,43%
21-50	1	4	3	18	9	35
	5,56%	10,81%	13%	20%	21,95%	16,59%
51-100	0	0	2	7	5	14
			8,70%	8%	12,20%	6,64%
101-150	0	2	1	3	4	10
		5,41%	4,30%	3%	9,76%	4,74%
151-200	0	0	0	4	1	5
				4%	2,44%	2,37%
More than 200	5	10	2	4	0	21
	27,78%	27,03%	8,70%	4%		9,95%

Nr. of volunteers

- More than 200: 10%
- 151-200: 2%
- 101-150: 5%
- 51-100: 7%
- 21-50: 17%
- 11-20: 19%
- 1-10: 40%

Legend: ■ 1-10 ■ 11-20 ■ 21-50 ■ 51-100 ■ 101-150 ■ 151-200 ■ More than 200

Number of young volunteers currently involved

Similar to the previous question, over 35% of the organisations involving young volunteers that responded to the questionnaire, have up to 10 young people volunteering, whilst 16% have 11 to 20 young volunteers. Almost 30% of organisations do not have young volunteers at this time. Ireland and Germany have the highest percentage of organisations that currently involve larger numbers of young volunteers where 16% - 17% involve between 21 and 50 young volunteers. This question was not asked in the Danish questionnaire.

Nr. of young volunteers	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**0**	**37** **19,17%**	**23** **11,92%**	**92** **47,67%**	**41** **21,24%**	**193** **100%**
0	0	23 62,16%	3 13%	23 25%	3 7,32%	**52** **26,94%**
1-10	0	1 2,70%	11 48%	38 41%	19 46,34%	**69** **35,75%**
11-20	0	1 2,70%	2 9%	20 22%	8 19,51%	**31** **16,06%**
21-50	0	6 16,22%	4 17%	6 7%	6 14,63%	**22** **11,40%**
51-100	0	2 5,41%	1 4%	3 3%	2 4,88%	**8** **4,15%**
101-150	0	2 5,41%	0	1 1%	0	**3** **1,55%**
151-200	0	0	0	1 1%	0	**1** **0,52%**
More than 200	0	4 10,81%	2 9%	0	0	**6** **3,11%**

Nr. of young volunteers

Legend: 0 — 1-10 — 11-20 — 21-50 — 51-100 — 101-150 — 151-200 — More than 200

- 0: 27%
- 1-10: 36%
- 11-20: 16%
- 21-50: 11%
- 51-100: 4%
- 101-150: 2%
- 151-200: 1%
- More than 200: 3%

Number of organisations that conduct volunteer programme or activities to support people facing loneliness, exclusion or isolation

When asked about whether they run volunteer programmes or activities that support people facing loneliness, exclusion or isolation, over 43% of organisations state that they did indeed run this kind of volunteer programme. Almost 15% of organisations stated that they are considering developing such volunteer programmes or activities.

There is also quite a high percentage of those that do not currently run volunteer programmes to support people facing loneliness, exclusion or isolation. This demonstrates that although there is a certain percentage of those that have developed or adjusted their volunteer programmes to support lonely, isolated and excluded people, there are still a lot of instances where awareness can be raised on the importance of supporting these groups.

Nr. of organisations	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	18	37	23	86	33	197
	9,14%	18,78%	11,68%	43,65%	16,75	100%
Yes	14	14	11	38	8	85
	77,78%	37,84%	47,80%	44%	24,24%	43,15%
No, but we are considering developing such volunteer programme/activities	0	4	0	9	16	29
		10,81%		10%	48,48	14,72%
No	4	19	12	39	9	83
	22,22%	51,35%	52,20%	45%	27,27%	42,13%

Description of programme or activities that organisations have implemented or plan to implement to support people facing loneliness, exclusion, or isolation

When it comes to the type of interventions, programmes/activities or actions that are implemented in partner countries, they be summarised as following:

- Support groups (peer-to-peer or with the professionals), Facebook groups
- Awareness raising through public dialogues, presentations, forums, seminars, social events, etc.
- Creative work (arts, crafts, knitting, etc.)
- Social activities (walks, visits, board games, card games, going to the cinema, museums, eating together and shared dining, etc.)
- Practical and individual support
- Workshops and education geared towards personal empowerment (improvement of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image)
- Social cafes, social centres and social gatherings
- Youth centres and youth networks (meeting place and platform where young people meet civil society organisations in order to start volunteering)
- Big brother, big sister friendship programmes, B-Friending programmes
- Music groups and music events
- Outdoor sports activities (soccer, hill walking, swimming, residential weekend away, etc.)

SLOVENIA

1. Creatively against COVID-19: offering young people a safe space to talk

2. Phone companionship and Intergenerational Cooperation: connecting young volunteer with elderly people via phone

3. Individual and group activities to promote social integration

DENMARK

1. Activities including a social cafe where young people can participate.

2. Joint activities, social gatherings.

3. An association creates a meeting place for young girls across schools and here they can meet other girls they would not otherwise meet. Some girls have a hard time in their classes, the association can give them some companionship they would not necessarily receive otherwise.

4. As a volunteer centre, we support the fact that local organisations can have a good framework in place and support for their efforts. Many of these help to combat loneliness. Together with a number of other organisations and Billund Municipality, we have put a special focus on young people, including young people who experience loneliness, by starting the 'YOUTH NETWORK'. It is both a meeting place and a platform where young people can meet other associations and try their hand at volunteering.

5. There are several communities where young people can participate with like-minded people

6. Actively be with the young people and do activities such as playing board games, walks

7. Provision of a meeting place where young people who feel lonely can come to various activities such as board games, trips to museums etc.

8. Provision of a meeting place with weekly activities where young people who feel lonely can meet up with other young people in a similar situation. Here they can play games, eat together, go for walks, watch movies, etc.

9. Also provided, 1 to 1 or groups, mentors, homework cafe, hospital cafes, groups in prison and much more

10. Also offered is a free, open, evening shelter for lonely young people. Work is in place to build the young people's internal community, give them the confidence and resources to include others in that community and thereby become resourceful persons themselves. They are then introduced as a group to other social and cultural offerings, so that they feel comfortable using these.

11. Big sister and big brother friendships. Friendship between young people 11-15 years old and adult friend 20-35 years old

12. Shared dining with activity evenings, board games, card games, walks etc. including activities such as bonfire evenings in the woods or soccer golf.

13. Local social communities are highlighted and lonely people are guided towards this.

14. Cafes that strengthen the community with activities for socially disadvantaged and lonely people.

IRELAND

1. We run activities exploring all youth issues and how to recognise and try to deal with the issues involving other organisations as necessary.

2. Girls develop their skills and confidence through teamwork activities. We have a strong emphasis on the outdoors, environment, community responsibility and teamwork. The girls' self-esteem and leadership skills are developed as they progress through Guiding. Leaders reach out to girls and adults if they are not engaging.

3. We offer lots of activities for U6-16 but parents have to be interested enough to bring the children along.

4. We have a weekly coffee meetup/drop in program as well as a community support group.

5. There is a B-Friending service available in the parish for all age groups.

6. We have a programme of activities and engagement opportunities for youth which are run through our Development Education team in Ireland. See here for more detail on these programmes - https://www.trocaire.org/our-work/educate/youth/

7. We organise social events to include our members and family members. Organise weekly meals out. We also provide support if they would like to go out.

8. Scouting provides adult training, skills, teamwork, safeguarding etc. Scouts provide social engagement, skills learning, teamwork, leadership all done through fun activities and challenges where the young person develops at their own pace. Participants are rewarded by scout badges.

9. Weekly meetings, outdoor field trips, overnight camping

10. Wednesdays and Thursdays 5.30 to 7.30pm a programme based on science, technology, electronics, arts and mathematics. Also drama and talent. Fridays 5.30 to 7.30 swimming classes. Weekends sports, adventure centres, and hill walking.

11. Mindfulness cafe

12. We encourage our members to volunteer and run their own events and workshops themselves, with the support of our facilitators.

13. Our helpline by text is open 24/7, staffed by peer volunteers, there to listen to anyone experiencing loneliness and supporting them to move forward.

14. We are a Community Development Residential Centre. We provide residentials programmes for young people and adults from marginalised & disadvantaged areas. Volunteerism is key to the running of the Centre & its programmes. We organise groups to come down for work camps, deliver our Christmas fair, and much more. This provides an opportunity for individuals to be part of a team & learn new skills.

15. Residential weekends away, day support meetings, provide age-appropriate information about cancer, online support - workshops, gaming etc.

16. Work with older persons and run activities to help reduce isolation like knitting etc

17. The S2S programme is specific to students in Trinity College Dublin and offers mentor groups on an opt-out basis to all incoming undergraduates with the aim of strengthening social networks for students and student volunteers, alleviating imposter phenomenon and increasing belonging. A specialist one to one support service is also available on request for all students.

18. Climate Action programmes in schools, climate dialogue sessions, research on sustainable communities, hosting young European volunteers, send young local volunteers abroad on ESC projects

19. The Leadership programme to support the development of skills and qualities required to make positive changes in their community. We also recently started a young volunteer run music group, which hopes to be able to plan and coordinate music events.

20. We are in the process of reactivating the volunteer befriending service for elderly people and others experiencing loneliness

21. We engage young people as equal partners in our programmes offering the same opportunities as other volunteers but supporting them to ensure they feel welcome and part of our organisation

GERMANY

1. Anti-bullying workshops.

2. Playmobil works in residential accommodation for refugees.

3. Online discussions about events.

4. Group work, joint trips through different countries, games.

5. Migrants experiencing exclusion at work. We have a Facebook group where we share information and we do webinars.

6. Youth centre, everyone can be part of it, age limit 6-21 years.

7. We do Youth Exchange.

8. Language and networking opportunities for refugees, volunteer teams and international youth exchange.

9. In some projects in Germany, our volunteers work with young people and children with disabilities. There, it is not only about support in everyday life, but also about social connection and activities. Many residents of the institutions are increasingly isolated, especially during COVID.

10. Project and network for refugees, exhibition project against domestic violence.

11. We run 4 seminars a year with volunteers. At the seminars, we have workshops on discrimination, self-care, dealing with conflict, etc. We also do monthly support meetings with the volunteers who need more support.

CROATIA

1. Social centre for young people with different activities (board games, mini library, volunteering).

2. We include young people who are marginalised in volunteer programmes and workshops. They have difficulties in socialisation and inclusion in their community. Through their local volunteer centre, we offer the possibility of active participation and involvement in active community life.

3. Through one of the association's projects, activity includes counselling and information including workshops (theory and practice) on various topics to do with psychological health such as emotions, conflicts, communication, self-awareness, relationships with others etc. These are conducted by experts such as educational rehabilitators, psychologists and social workers.

4. The organisation implements a programme that largely involves young people who have lower levels of social-emotional skills and have insufficiently developed friendships and other networks. Within the programme, young people participate in a process that helps design and implement volunteer actions and activities, in cooperation with other volunteer involving organisations in the community. Also, as a part of the programme, they are provided with various educational activities as well as other activities focused on how to spend their free time well.

5. Encouraging socialisation, creating activities, workshops, and psychological support to users through the half-day stay programme with preschool and school children age. This includes children with developmental disabilities, children from families with lower financial status and those without adequate parental care as well as children from foster families. Through providers of social services, we also have psychological support, which is held individually with users.

6. We run the Education Club programme, which, as part of its activities, also has support in the form of individual and group work with young people and a counselling centre.

7. Volunteer activities in our association primarily rely on current projects that the association puts in place which are broad in scope. These range from work in education, work with employers, and work in culture. Continuous volunteer activity in the association provides us with psychosocial support and free legal aid, so in that sense, we have long-term cooperation with external experts (volunteers), while all female employees work on providing peer to peer support in that area as well as additional education. Through its activities, the association provides help and support to LGBTIQ young people who are in need, and are often the target of homophobic, peer violence or domestic violence and at increased risk of social exclusion and isolation (counselling). We also aim to support young people and provide a safe space, by holding lectures on LGBTIQ topics and human rights in primary and secondary schools, involving young people in the organisation of public events, and starting a youth group that serves for their mutual empowerment, sharing and initiation of public actions that are directed towards active citizenship. Our association started a youth group that serves as a safe space for young people up to 30 years of age to exchange experience and active engagement in the local community.

Support that organisations need to develop or further improve a programme or activities towards combating loneliness and isolation amongst young people

In order to develop or further improve programmes or activities towards combating loneliness and isolation amongst young people, organisations stated the following types of support that they feel would be most effective:

✓ Over 56% of organisations recognise the value and power of examples of good practice and exchange of information with other volunteer managers, organisations or networks.

✓ Over 49% of the questioned organisations stated that they lack the knowledge or skills required to find and recruit young people affected by loneliness and isolation.

✓ Over 48% of organisations stated that they lack the knowledge or skills for adapting or implementing new activities for youths affected by loneliness and isolation.

✓ Over 45% of organisations recognised the need for support from local, regional or national government in the area in which their organisation operates.

	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**18** **9,63%**	**37** **19,79%**	**23** **12,30%**	**76** **40,64%**	**33** **17,65%**	**187** **100%**
Knowledge and competences about adapting or implementing new activities for youth affected by loneliness and isolation	6 33,33%	21 56,76%	11 47,83%	31 15%	22 66,67%	**91** **48,66%**
Knowledge and competences about finding and recruiting young people affected by loneliness and isolation	11 61,11%	20 54,05%	6 26,09%	38 18%	17 51,52%	**92** **49,20%**

General knowledge and information on the issues of loneliness and isolation amongst youth	3 16,67%	17 45,95%	5 21,74%	26 12%	14 42,42%	**65** **34,76%**
Examples of good practice and exchange of information with other volunteer managers/organisations/networks	6 33,33%	22 59,46%	8 34,78%	47 22%	22 66,67%	**105** **56,15%**
Professional support of other experienced or skilled organisations (mentoring)	3 16,67%	11 29,73%	8 34,78%	20 9%	10 30,30%	**52** **27,81%**
Support from local/regional/national government in the area in which your organisation operates	8 44,44%	20 54,05%	9 39,13%	34 16%	15 45,15%	**86** **45,99%**
We do not need additional support and/or we can rely on our own organisational resources	2 11,11%	3 8,11%	2 8,70%	2 1%	2 6,06%	**11** **5,88%**
Other (financial support, support platforms, etc)	2 11,11%	4 10,81%	5 21,74%	13 6%	0	**24** **12,83%**

Needed support
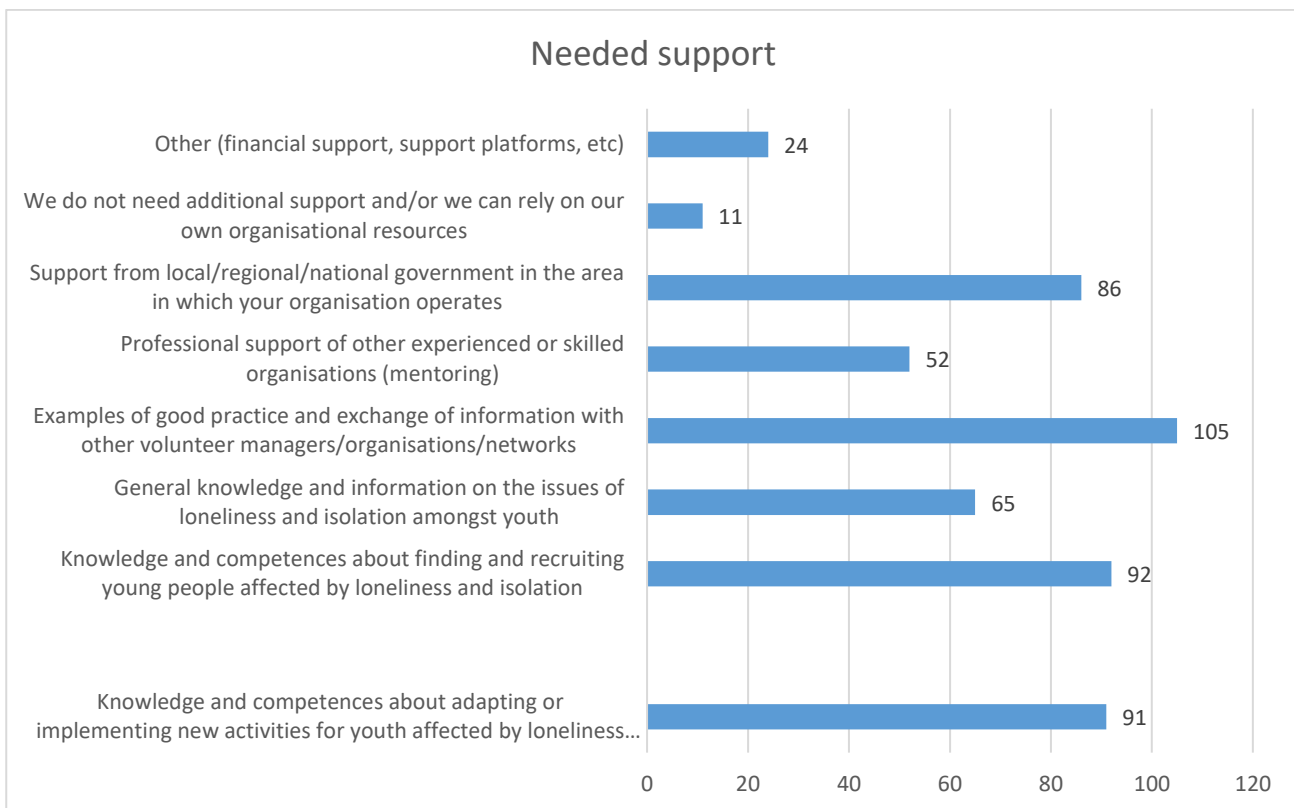
Enabling environment

An enabling environment can be observed through five elements; the legal framework, public policies, social atmosphere, existing good practice and the culture of volunteering. Results across the partner countries differ in this area. Those countries that have some kind of public policies in place, namely Slovenia, Germany and Ireland, stated that the legal frameworks or public policies are generally good, as well as the social atmosphere. In Denmark, this question was skipped. The existing good practice and culture of volunteering were rated, on average, better, in all partner

countries. This indicates, the greater role of civil society and its interventions in combating loneliness, isolation and social exclusion.
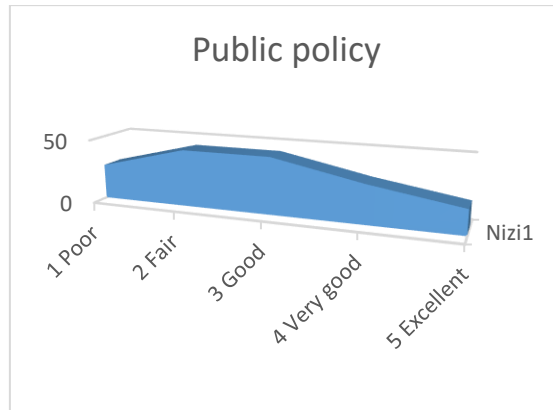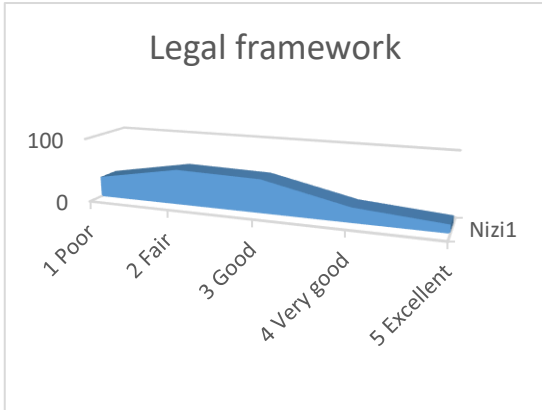
On average, the legal framework and public policies were estimated to range from fair to good. Croatia specifically was rated as fair, while other countries rated good. Considering the fact that Croatia is almost the only partner country lacking a legal and policy framework in this area, the results are not surprising. The situation with public policies was slightly better, as some of the countries have certain types of recommendations in place or national/local plans that tackle the issues of loneliness and isolation.
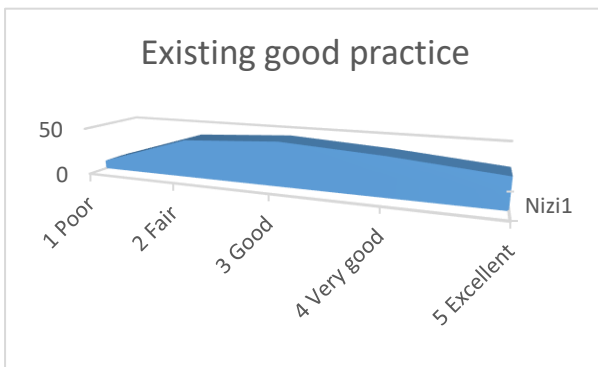
A more positive result was with the existing good practice recognised among the organisations involved in this research. Best practice was rated between good and excellent in almost all countries. Interestingly, in Germany (at almost 35%) and in Croatia (over 45%) the existing good practice was rated as mostly fair, while in Slovenia it was mostly rated as excellent (38%).

Culture of volunteering
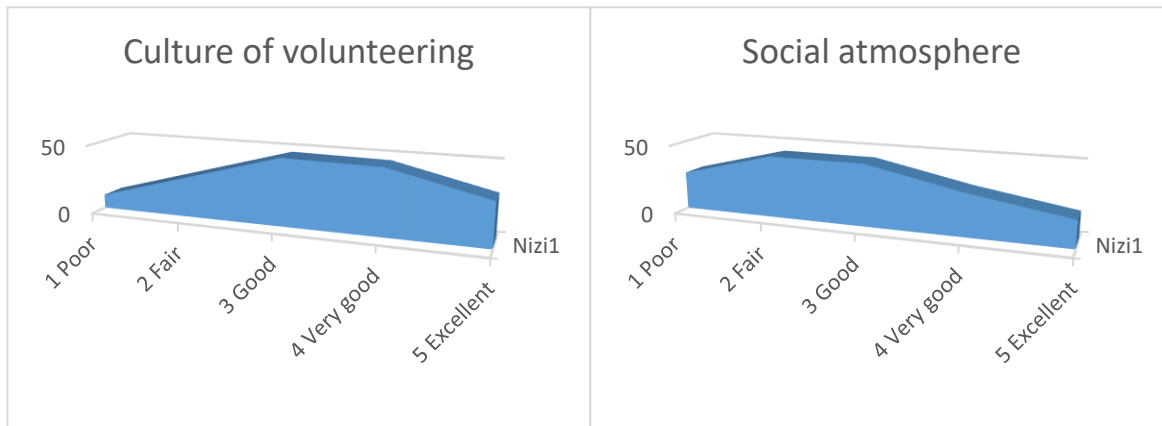
Social atmosphere

Social atmosphere was rated generally from fair to good. This can be explained by the consequence of different social, political and economic factors and the perma crisis that we have been living through in the last few years with COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and inflation, etc. In Slovenia and Ireland it was mostly rated between good and very good, while in Croatia it was rated mostly as fair.

The culture of volunteering was rated in general between good and excellent. It was rated highest in Slovenia, with over 70% rating it between very good and excellent, with over 60% in Germany. Over 75% in Croatia rated the culture of volunteering as between fair and good. In Ireland, the culture of volunteering was rated between good and very good by over 65% of respondents.

		1 Poor	2 Fair	3 Good	4 Very good	5 Excellent
Nr. of respondents	**Denmark**	0				
	Ireland	36 (21,43%)				
	Germany	23 (13,69%)				
	Slovenia	76 (45,24%)				
	Croatia	33 (19,64%)				
	Total	168 (100%)				
Legal framework	**Denmark**	0	0	0	0	0
	Ireland	7 19,44%	13 36,11%	12 33,33%	4 11,11%	0
	Germany	0	9 39,13%	10 43,48%	0	1 4,35%
	Slovenia	10 13%	14 18%	22 29%	19 25%	11 14%
	Croatia	5 15,15%	19 57,58%	8 24,24%	0	1 3,03%
	Total	**32 (19,05%)**	**55 (32,74%)**	**52 (30,95%)**	**23 (13,69%)**	**13 (7,74%)**
Public policy/ies	**Denmark**	0	0	0	0	0
	Ireland	7 20%	10 28,57%	14 40%	4 11,43%	0

	Germany	3 13,04%	7 30,43%	9 39,13%	1 4,35%	0
	Slovenia	9 12%	9 12%	15 20%	24 32%	19 25%
	Croatia	8 24,24%	18 54,55%	6 18,18%	1 3,03%	0
	Total	**27 (16,07%)**	**44 (26,19%)**	**44 (26,19%)**	**30 (17,86%)**	**19 (11,31%)**
Existing good practice	Denmark	0	0	0	0	0
	Ireland	3 8,33%	9 25%	15 41,67%	9 25%	1 2,78%
	Germany	1 4,35%	8 34,78%	7 30,43%	4 17,39%	0
	Slovenia	2 3%	8 11%	13 17%	24 32%	29 38%
	Croatia	3 9,09%	15 45,45%	11 33,33%	3 9,09%	1 3,03%
	Total	**9 (5,36%)**	**40 (23,81)**	**46 (27,38%)**	**40 (23,81%)**	**31 (18,45%)**
Social atmosphere	Denmark	0	0	0	0	0
	Ireland	4 11,43%	4 11,43%	18 50%	9 25%	1 2,78%
	Germany	0	7 30,43%	8 34,78%	4 17,39%	1 4,35%
	Slovenia	4 5%	4 5%	15 20%	21 28%	32 42%
	Croatia	3 9,09%	19 57,58%	8 24,24%	3 9,09%	0
	Total	**11 (6,55%)**	**34 (20,24%)**	**49 (29,17%)**	**37 (22,02%)**	**34 (20,24%)**
Culture of volunteering	Denmark	0	0	0	0	0
	Ireland	5 13,89%	6 16,67%	12 33,33%	12 33,33%	1 2,78%
	Germany	2 8,70%	7 30,43%	7 30,43%	2 8,70%	2 8,70%
	Slovenia	1 1%	5 7%	14 18%	29 38%	27 36%
	Croatia	2 6,06%	11 33,33%	15 45,45%	4 12,12%	1 3,03%
	Total	**10 (5,65%)**	**29 (17,26%)**	**48 (28,57%)**	**47 (27,98%)**	**31 (18,45%)**

Involving young people affected by loneliness and isolation as volunteers

Besides developing programmes or activities for people that are experiencing loneliness, isolation and social exclusion, organisations were asked if they have or have a tendency to volunteer programmes in which they involve people affected by loneliness and isolation as volunteers.

Over 41% of organisations stated that they do indeed have such programmes, but also 40% of the organisations did not know, or were not aware, if their volunteers were affected by loneliness and inclusion. An explanation for this may be that some organisations are, in their nature, open to everyone and don't ask participants about this rising phenomenon. For example, in Denmark over 38% of organisations stated that they do not know or were not aware of participants experiencing loneliness. On the other hand, organisations may still not be aware of the loneliness and isolation of

youth as a rising issue in today's world. An interesting fact is that in Croatia, over 66% of organisations stated that they have already involved volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation.

Nr. of organisations	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**18** **9,73%**	**37** **20%**	**23** **12,43%**	**74** **40%**	**33** **17,84%**	**185** **100%**
Yes	4 22,22%	15 40,54%	10 43,50%	26 35%	22 66,67%	**77** **41,62%**
We don't know, or we are not aware of it	7 38,89%	14 37,84%	10 43,50%	33 45%	10 30,30%	**74** **40%**
No, but we are considering it	5 27,78%	7 18,92%	3 13%	7 9%	1 3,03%	**23** **12,43%**
No, but we are not considering it	2 11,11%	1 2,70%	0	8 11%	0	**11** **5,95%**

The effects or the value recognised for the young volunteers that have been dealing with loneliness and isolation

There were similarities stated by organisations in the partner countries, that were already involving volunteers experiencing loneliness and isolation. The most recognised effects or the value for the young people were:

✓ Volunteering had positive effects on their mental health or overall personal well-being - on average over 72%.
✓ Volunteering was a good way to connect with others and helped expand their social network- on average over 72.)
✓ Volunteering helped to build self-esteem and self-confidence - over 67%.
✓ Volunteering helped them overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation - over 65%.

	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**4** **2,72%**	**30** **20,41%**	**23** **15,65%**	**59** **40,14%**	**31** **21,09%**	**147** **100%**
Volunteering helped them overcome the feelings of loneliness and isolation	2 50%	22 73,33%	8 34,78%	42 19%	23 74,19%	**97** **65,99%**
Volunteering had positive effects on their mental health or overall personal well-being	4 100%	24 80%	10 43,48%	44 20%	25 80,65%	**107** **72,79%**
Volunteering was a good way to connect with others and helped expand their social network	4 100%	24 80%	14 60,87%	41 18%	24 77,42%	**107** **72,79%**
Volunteering helped to build self-esteem and self-confidence	4 100%	23 76,67%	15 65,22%	37 17%	20 64,52%	**99** **67,35%**
Volunteering brought more balance in their daily activities or provided a new purpose in their lives	0	13 43,33%	8 34,78%	29 13%	18 58,06%	**68** **46,26%**
Volunteering was a bridge to reconnect with the community	2 50%	15 50%	10 43,48%	26 12%	16 51,61%	**69** **46,94%**

Volunteering had a negative/overwhelming/disruptive effect	0	0	3 13,04%	0	0	**3** **2,04%**
Other (positive impact of volunteering, etc.)	2 50%	2 6,67%	1 4,35%	4 2%	0	**9** **6,12%**

Effects and value of volunteering for youth
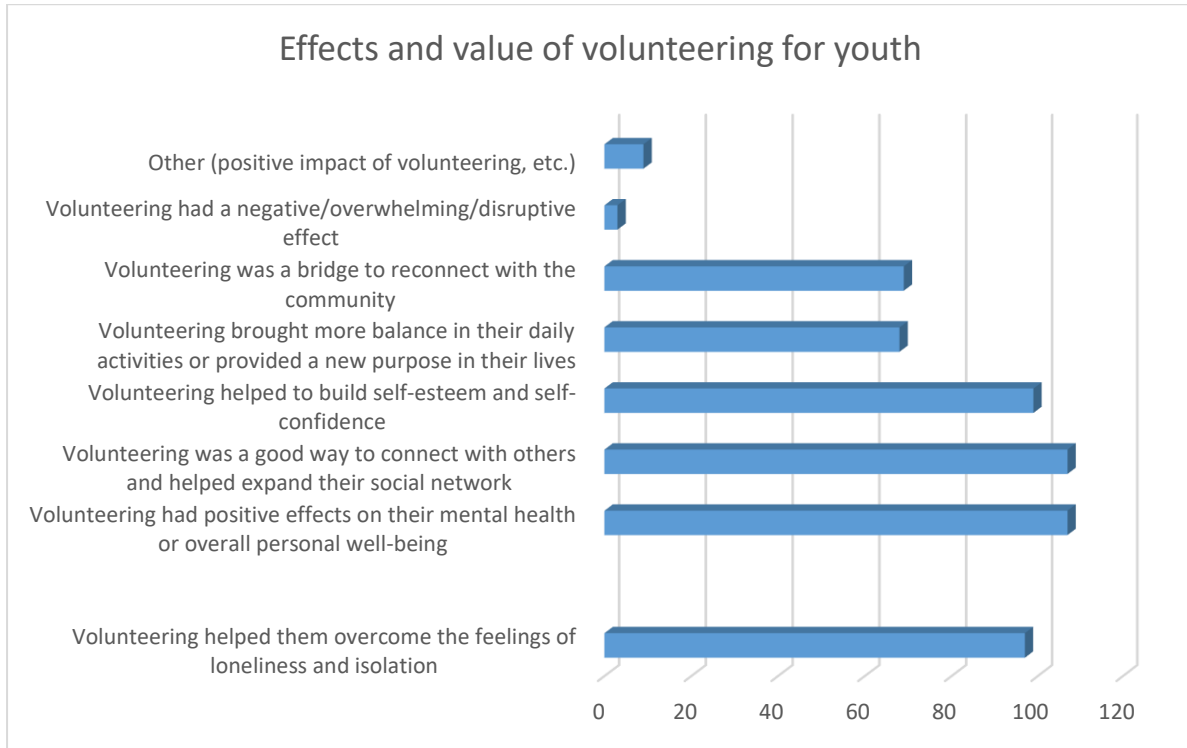
Positive quotes or statements on the value of volunteering by a young volunteer dealing with loneliness and isolation

SLOVENIA

Thirteen organisations answered this question with a quote or a thought. For the purpose of the questionnaire analysis we will share one:

'I feel good in your organisation, I feel wanted and useful.'

(Anonymous volunteer)

DENMARK

'There is room for everyone. You can be yourself.'

'You get more back than you give.'

IRELAND

'The best way to feel involved is to embrace involvement. Around you are all the areas of activity and heritage that could benefit from your involvement, and you too would at the centre of things - give and take - feel needed'

'Being with like-minded people makes me feel safe, included and accepted'

'We have two main ways to engage young people in our work (aged 15-25). One is through our Development Education programme of work in Ireland. The 2nd way is through our work experience programme for TY's. We haven't focused on issues of isolation or loneliness before but in our experience, students who do voluntary work with us always enjoy their experience and get a lot from it as seen in the thank you cards they send in afterwards. (Cork student 'I want to say thanks for making me feel so welcome and giving me such good life skills. I had the best time working in Trocaire and I wish nothing but hope, happiness and love in your future').

'Volunteering helps me to give back some of the good experiences I got from my own time in scouts and gives me pleasure in seeing effect it has on young people that I help.'

'I got so much joy from getting involved in teamwork activities.'

'You are never alone.'

'Getting involved in our communities can have a positive impact on our self-esteem and confidence. In doing something good for someone else, we have also done something for ourselves.'

'I'm still in contact with my mentees four years on and just had lunch with two of them here in London a few weeks ago. You were right about lifelong friendships that come out of S2S. Being a mentor was by far the best part about my undergrad.'

'It gave me a reason to get up in the morning. It helped to be part of something new.'

'Confidence boosting experience which led to making friends and gaining employment.'

GERMANY

1. 'Here is better than at home, I feel comfortable.'

2. 'Volunteering has helped me learn new things and figure out what I want to study in the future.'

3. 'It was the coolest time in my life.'

CROATIA

1. 'When I volunteer at the Association, I don't think about nonsense.'

2. 'Because of volunteering (obligations that I have to come and help), I don't take pills that make me sleepy.'

3. 'We gave them the best days of their lives.'

Statements that best relate to involving volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation
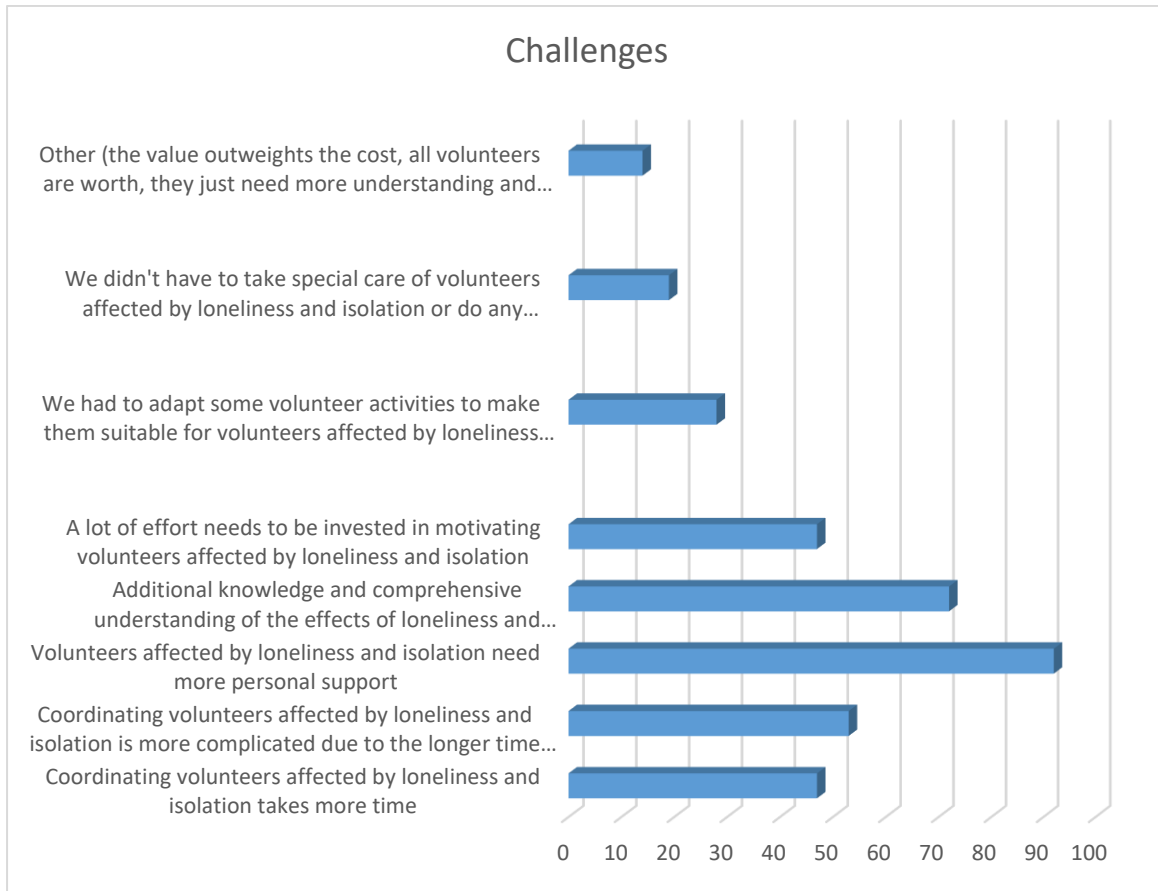
When it comes to the challenges of involving volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation, the most common ones recognised by more than half of organisations that were involved in the research and already involved volunteers were:

✓ Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation need more personal support - over 60%.
✓ Additional knowledge and comprehensive understanding of the effects of loneliness and isolation is required to work with them as volunteers - over 47%.

One third of questioned organisations also recognised challenges regarding coordination and motivation of volunteers:

✓ Coordinating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation is more complicated due to the longer time period required for volunteers to feel confident and secure in their role - over 35%.
✓ Coordinating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation takes more time- over 31%.
✓ A lot of effort needs to be invested in motivating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation- over 31%.

	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**4**	**34**	**23**	**59**	**31**	**151**
	2,65%	**22,52%**	**15,23%**	**39,07%**	**20,53%**	**100%**
Coordinating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation takes more time	2	11	5	18	11	**47**
	50%	32,35%	21,74%	12%	35,48%	**31,13%**
Coordinating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation is more complicated due to the longer time period required for volunteers to feel confident and secure in their role	1	12	6	20	14	**53**
	25%	35,29%	26,09%	13%	45,16%	**35,10%**
Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation need more personal support	1	19	13	37	22	**92**
	25%	55,86%	56,52%	24%	70,97%	**60,93%**
Additional knowledge and comprehensive understanding of the effects of loneliness and isolation is required to work with them as volunteers	0	15	7	29	21	**72**
		44,12%	30,43%	19%	67,74%	**47,68%**
A lot of effort needs to be invested in motivating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation	0	10	1	23	13	**47**
		29,41%	4,35%	15%	41,94%	**31,13%**
We had to adapt some volunteer activities to make them suitable for volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation	1	6	2	12	7	**28**
	25%	17,65%	8,70%	8%	22,58%	**18,54%**
We didn't have to take special care of volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation or do any adjustments in our volunteer programme or activities	0	6	3	6	4	**19**
		17,65%	13,04%	4%	12,90%	**12,58%**
Other (the value outweighs the cost, all volunteers are worth, they just need more understanding and support, etc)	0	4	1	8	1	**14**
		11,76%	4,35%	5%	3,23%	**9,27%**

Challenges

- Other (the value outweights the cost, all volunteers are worth, they just need more understanding and...
- We didn't have to take special care of volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation or do any...
- We had to adapt some volunteer activities to make them suitable for volunteers affected by loneliness...
- A lot of effort needs to be invested in motivating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation
- Additional knowledge and comprehensive understanding of the effects of loneliness and...
- Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation need more personal support
- Coordinating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation is more complicated due to the longer time...
- Coordinating volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation takes more time

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Main obstacles for implementing or developing a volunteer programme combating youth loneliness and isolation or involving young volunteers dealing with loneliness and isolation

All organisations involved in the research, (those that already involved volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation, as well as those that did not involve them) were asked about the obstacles for implementing or developing a volunteer programme combating youth loneliness and isolation or involving young volunteers dealing with loneliness and isolation. The most common responses in general, also found in all partner countries, were:

- ✓ We do not have enough resources (human, financial) to adapt the activities and volunteer programmes to involve youth affected by loneliness and isolation - over 51%.
- ✓ Insufficient organisational capacity - over 41%.
- ✓ We do not have sufficient knowledge and competences to work with youth affected by loneliness and isolation - over 29%.

Only 16.5% of organisations did not recognise any of the obstacles within their organisations.

	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**17** **9,55%**	**36** **20,22%**	**23** **12,92%**	**70** **39,33%**	**32** **17,98%**	**178** **100%**
Insufficient organisational capacity	7 41,18%	16 44,44%	5 21,74%	30 21%	16 50%	**74** **41,57%**
We do not have sufficient knowledge and competences to work with youth affected by loneliness and isolation	2 11,76%	12 33,33%	4 17,39%	22 15%	12 37,50%	**52** **29,21%**
We do not have enough resources (human, financial) to adapt the activities and volunteer programme to involve youth affected by loneliness and isolation	5 29,41%	18 50%	9 39,13%	39 27%	20 62,50%	**91** **51,12%**
Previous bad experiences	0	0	0	3 2%	0	**3** **1,69%**
Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation demand more resources than they can give	1 5,88%	4 11,11%	0	11 8%	4 12,50%	**20** **11,24%**
Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation are too vulnerable for our type of activities	0	2 5,56%	0	8 5%	0	**10** **5,62%**
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to maintain any of our activities involving volunteers.	0	2 5,56%	3 13,04%	9 6%	0	**14** **7,87%**
Our beneficiaries come from different vulnerable groups, and we find our activities inappropriate for involving young volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation	0	2 5,56%	4 17,39%	8 5%	2 6,25%	**16** **8,99%**
We do not recognize any of the obstacles within our organisation	4 23,53%	8 22,22%	5 21,74%	9 6%	4 12,50%	**30** **16,85%**
Other (didn't have time for this topic, didn't find young volunteers, persuading colleagues, etc)	4 23,53%	4 11,11%	0	7 5%	1 3,12%	**16** **8,99%**

Obstacles

(chart categories, top to bottom)
- Other (didn't have time for this topic, didn't find young volunteers, persuading colleagues, etc)
- We do not recognize any of the obstacles within our organisation
- Our beneficiaries come from different vulnerable groups, and we find our activities inappropriate for…
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to maintain any of our activities involving volunteers.
- Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation are too vulnerable for our type of activities
- Volunteers affected by loneliness and isolation demand more resources than they can give
- Previous bad experiences
- We do not have enough resources (human, financial) to adapt the activities and volunteer programme to…
- We do not have sufficient knowledge and competences to work with youth affected by…
- Insufficient organisational capacity

Providing support relevant for developing volunteer programmes towards combating youth loneliness and isolation or to involve young volunteers dealing with loneliness and isolation

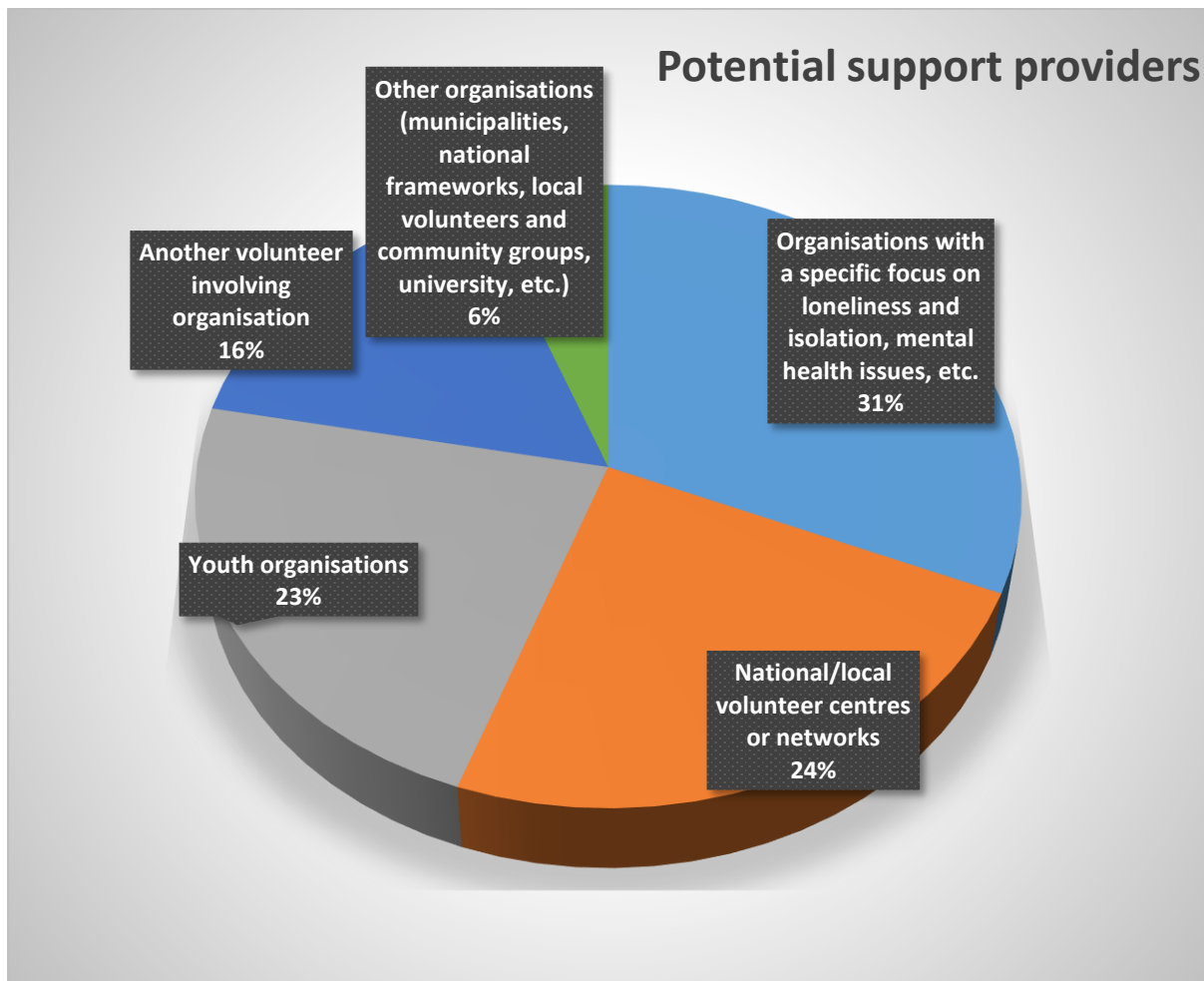Respondents were also asked which type of organisation could provide support relevant for developing volunteer programmes towards combating youth loneliness and isolation or to involve young volunteers dealing with loneliness and isolation. In general, at over 68%, it was felt that organisations with a specific focus on loneliness and isolation, mental health issues, etc. would be most beneficial. This was followed by national or local volunteer centres or networks at over 52% and youth organisations at over 49%.

Even though only 12% of organisations stated other stakeholders, it is worth mentioning that the role of other stakeholders in providing support was recognised mostly within municipalities in Denmark. Universities were also mentioned as stakeholders that could provide support in this area.

	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**17**	**36**	**23**	**70**	**32**	**178**
	9,55%	**20,22%**	**12,92%**	**39,33%**	**17,98%**	**100%**
Organisations with a specific focus on loneliness and isolation, mental health issues, etc.	13	23	17	49	20	**122**
	76,47%	63,89%	73,91%	32%	62,50%	**68,54%**

National/local volunteer centres or networks	11 64,71%	19 52,78%	8 34,78%	33 21%	22 68,75%	**93 52,25%**
Youth organisations	6 35,29%	17 47,22%	10 43,48%	35 23%	20 62,50%	**88 49,44%**
Another volunteer involving organisation	3 17,56%	12 33,33%	6 26,09%	32 21%	10 31,25%	**63 35,39%**
Other organisations (municipalities, national frameworks, local volunteers and community groups, university, etc.)	7 41,18%	9 25%	1 4,35%	5 3%	0	**22 12,36%**

Potential support providers

- Other organisations (municipalities, national frameworks, local volunteers and community groups, university, etc.) 6%
- Another volunteer involving organisation 16%
- Youth organisations 23%
- Organisations with a specific focus on loneliness and isolation, mental health issues, etc. 31%
- National/local volunteer centres or networks 24%

The role of civil society in combating loneliness and isolation amongst youth in general
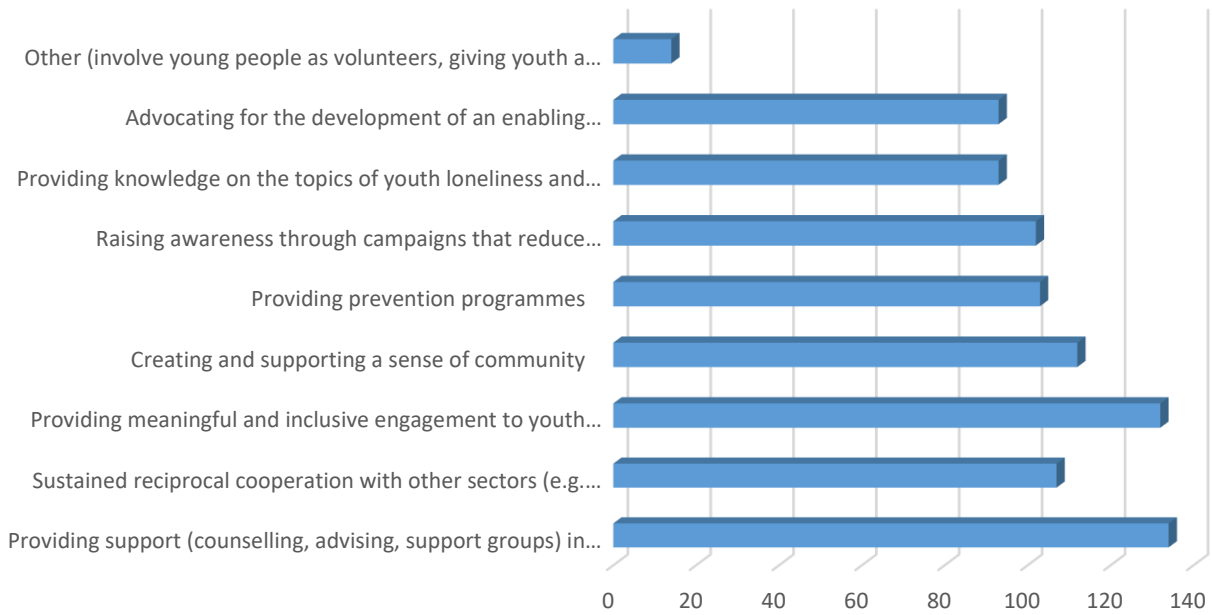
The role of civil society in combating loneliness and isolation amongst youth in general has been widely recognised by all organisations involved in the research. More than half the organisations recognise the role of civil society in different areas including; awareness raising, providing direct

support and engagement of youth and cooperation with other sectors. Also recognised is the provision of knowledge and advocating for an enabling environment that supports volunteer programmes that involve youth affected by loneliness and isolation.

According to the overall research analysis, civil society is recognised as one of the main stakeholders in tackling loneliness and isolation of youth. It not only provides various social interventions in the communities, but also has a 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.

	Denmark	Ireland	Germany	Slovenia	Croatia	Total
Nr. of respondents	**17** **9,55%**	**37** **20,79%**	**23** **12,92%**	**69** **38,76%**	**32** **17,98%**	**178** **100%**
Providing support (counselling, advising, support groups) in combating youth loneliness and isolation	11 64,71%	28 75,68%	15 65,21%	51 14%	29 90,62%	**134** **75,28%**
Sustained reciprocal cooperation with other sectors (e.g. referring youth that need professional help to health professionals and vice versa)	11 64,71%	18 48,65%	12 52,17%	44 12%	22 68,75%	**107** **60,11%**
Providing meaningful and inclusive engagement to youth affected by loneliness and isolation	13 76,47%	26 70,27%	14 60,87%	52 15%	27 84,38%	**132** **74,16%**
Creating and supporting a sense of community	0	29 78,38%	6 26,09%	52 15%	25 78,12%	**112** **62,92%**
Providing prevention programmes	13 76,47%	19 51,35%	9 39,13%	44 12%	18 56,25%	**103** **57,87%**
Raising awareness through campaigns that reduce stigmatization of young people facing loneliness and isolation	5 29,41%	25 67,57%	11 47,83%	38 11%	23 71,88%	**102** **57,30%**
Providing knowledge on the topics of youth loneliness and isolation through education and trainings	4 23,53%	20 54,05%	9 39,13%	37 10%	23 71,88%	**93** **52,25%**
Advocating for the development of an enabling environment that supports volunteer programmes that involve youth affected by loneliness and isolation	8 47,06%	22 59,46%	8 34,78%	37 10%	18 56,25%	**93** **52,25%**
Other (involve young people as volunteers, giving youth a hope, etc.)	8 47,06%	3 8,11%	0	3 1%	0	**14** **7,87%**

The role of civil society

Category	Value
Other (involve young people as volunteers, giving youth a…	
Advocating for the development of an enabling…	
Providing knowledge on the topics of youth loneliness and…	
Raising awareness through campaigns that reduce…	
Providing prevention programmes	
Creating and supporting a sense of community	
Providing meaningful and inclusive engagement to youth…	
Sustained reciprocal cooperation with other sectors (e.g.…	
Providing support (counselling, advising, support groups) in…	

5. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research analysis presents the starting point of the project Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering where the main goal is to raise awareness about volunteering as a possible means of preventing and alleviating social isolation of the youth and as a source of empowerment for youth organisations and organisations involving young volunteers.

This research was designed to explore:
- To what extent do existing EU and national policies and practices in partner countries grasp the process of volunteering, support it and see it as a possible solution in the fight against loneliness, isolation, and exclusion of young people.
-The role of volunteers and Civil Society Organisations.
-The role of volunteer centres, youth organisations, and other volunteering organisations and communities in Europe.
- To seek out relevant statistics to measure the level of loneliness, and isolation among young people.

In order to approach the topic comprehensively, desk research in all partner countries, and the 5 additional countries of Spain, Italy, Portugal, France and Bulgaria, has been combined with the questionnaire for civil society organisations working with or involving youths as volunteers. 231 organisations from Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Slovenia and Croatia responded to the questionnaire.

The purpose of this research is to help develop and establish quality volunteer programmes that are geared towards combating the isolation of young people.

The desk research conducted states that there is no common law on volunteering at the EU level of. EU institutions have however stressed the importance of making volunteering more inclusive through relevant policy papers and European programmes.

Despite the existing EU policy framework on volunteering and social inclusion, the practice in Member states varies:

✓ While some countries have adopted specific legal frameworks for volunteering including Italy, Spain, Slovenia and Croatia who have a law on volunteering others, such as France and Portugal, have volunteering and its terms defined in other laws. The remaining countries, Ireland, Denmark and Germany (although they do have law on federal level), lean on long traditions of volunteering and active citizen participation and function well without a law on volunteering or any legal regulation on volunteering. Bulgaria has had a draft law on volunteering since 2006.
✓ Denmark, Ireland and Slovenia have national strategies/programmes aimed at the development of volunteering. This suggests that volunteering needs to be supported and recognised on a national level by relevant institutions.
✓ In most of the partner countries, with the exception of Croatia, there is no specific governmental body responsible for volunteering. Volunteering has been present in different areas within policies and represented in different ministries and state offices.

Issues of loneliness and isolation have been creating problems for young people in the past few years. These have been magnified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the on-going social, political and economic crisis.

✓ Research conducted by the Commission's Joint Research Centre shows that loneliness has spiked across the EU in recent years as a result of the COVID19 pandemic. In 2016, 12% of EU citizens felt lonely more than half the time.[57] This figure more than doubled to 25% in the first few months of the COVID19 pandemic.[58] The increase in feelings of loneliness was felt evenly, geographically speaking, across the European Union, with all member states having loneliness levels of between 22% - 26%.[59]

✓ Despite the various research conducted in all countries and at the EU level, none of the countries involved in the project has yet a specific national strategy or plan to combat loneliness. The topic of loneliness, isolation and social exclusion are represented in some other plans and programmes, mostly those combating social exclusion or dealing with mental health issues.

✓ Denmark has a recommendation from 2021 to adopt a national strategy to combat loneliness. In Spain also there are local initiatives and recommendations to adopt local strategies for combating loneliness.

In all partner countries there are good examples of best practice in civil society organisations when it comes to providing support to young people feeling lonely, isolated and thus, socially excluded.

✓ In most partner countries there is no specific focus on young people who may feel lonely and isolated. The existing practice shows that we still lack volunteer programmes that strategically and deliberately involve lonely young people as volunteers.

As a result of the research, the following conclusions of CSO challenges and responses to tackle loneliness, isolation and social exclusion of youth demonstrated that:

✓ Over 43% of organisations state that they implement volunteer programmes to support youths facing loneliness and isolation. Almost 15% of organisations state that they are considering developing such volunteer programmes or activities. Over 42% of organisations do not implement such programmes. This demonstrates that there is still a lot of space left to raise awareness on the importance of supporting these groups.

✓ Over 56% of organisations recognise the value and power of examples of good practice and exchange of information with other volunteer managers, organisations or networks.

✓ Over 49% of those questioned stated that they lack knowledge and competences about finding and recruiting young people affected by loneliness and isolation.

✓ Over 48% of organisations stated that they lack knowledge and competences about adapting or implementing new activities for youth affected by loneliness and isolation.

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[57] Joint Research Centre, 'Loneliness in the EU Insights From Surveys and Online Media Data', p.7, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC125873

[58] Ibid

[59] Ibid

- ✓ Over 45% of organisations recognised the need for the support from local, regional or national government in the area in which their organisation operates.
- ✓ Enabling the environment was observed through five elements; the legal framework, public policies, social atmosphere, existing good practice and the culture of volunteering. The results across the partner countries differ. Those countries that have some kind of public policy in practice such as Slovenia, Germany and Ireland, stated that the legal frameworks or public policies are, on average, good as are the social atmospheres. The existing good practice and culture of volunteering were better rated, on average, in all partner countries, which refers to the greater role of civil society and its interventions in combating loneliness, isolation and social exclusion.
- ✓ Over 41% of the organisations already involved youth affected by loneliness and isolation as volunteers. 40% of the organisations did not know, or were not aware, if their volunteers were people affected by loneliness and inclusion.
- ✓ 60% to 70% of the organisations recognize the positive effects of volunteering on; mental health or overall personal well-being, expanding the social network of volunteers, building self-esteem and self-confidence and helping to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- ✓ Main obstacles in involving youths affected by loneliness and isolation as volunteers were cited as; insufficient human and financial resources - over 51%; insufficient organisational capacity - over 41%; insufficient knowledge and competences to work with youth affected by loneliness and isolation - over 29%.
- ✓ Organisations with a specific focus on loneliness, isolation and mental health issues etc. (over 68%), national/local volunteer centres or networks (over 52%) and youth organisations (over 49%), are recognised as relevant stakeholders in providing support to volunteer involving organisations.
- ✓ The role of civil society in combating loneliness and isolation amongst youths has been widely recognised by all organisations involved in this research. More than half recognise the role of civil society in areas such as awareness raising, providing direct support and engagement of youth and cooperation with other sectors. Also cited was the provision of knowledge and advocating for an enabling environment that supports volunteer programmes that involve youths affected by loneliness and isolation.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In an increasingly individualised society, loneliness and isolation among young people has become a growing problem, which the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated. Loneliness and isolation can lead to social exclusion and severe distress in young people. To help combat this, civil society plays an extremely important role.

The success of civil society interventions and programmes depends partly on the kind of volunteering activities offered to support youths affected by loneliness and isolation and depends also on those that may be suitable for involvement and active engagement. As well as this, success is dependent on the support and conditions that governments, volunteer development agencies and volunteer-involving organisations can provide.

Even though there is some awareness being raised on the issue of loneliness and isolation, as yet, there are no specifically developed ways to encourage and support youths affected by loneliness, isolation and social isolation to volunteer. Likewise, the supports are not in place to help motivate and support civil society organisations to create such programmes.

The findings of this research indicate that there is significant evidence in favour of volunteer programmes that not only support youths affected by loneliness, isolation and social exclusion, but also involve them as volunteers.

Recommendations

ADVOCATING FOR MORE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT TO COMBAT LONELINESS, ISOLATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION
The research results have demonstrated that there is a lack of local, national and European recommendations, plans or programmes tackling the problem of loneliness and isolation that has been raised in the past few years.

European statistics prove that there is an increase in the feelings of loneliness and isolation, and that youths are becoming more and more affected. Even though there are existing practices of civil society in the area, there are no sufficient policies, mechanisms and measures that support the development of programmes geared towards combating loneliness and isolation that either support or actively involve youths in volunteering. Such measures will create a more enabling environment and thus contribute to the improvement of quality civil society interventions and existing practices.

NETWORKING AND PARTNERSHIP ON LOCAL/NATIONAL/EUROPEAN LEVEL
One of the main research results states that there is a need for more exchanges of good practice in order to support organisations and stimulate cooperation between civil society organisations in the development of programmes combating loneliness and isolation. We need to go beyond local and national efforts and promote transnational dialogue and knowledge exchange in order to create more European-wide practices and an improved infrastructure for sustainable volunteering opportunities for youths affected by loneliness and isolation.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Volunteering and quality volunteering programmes can play a key role in supporting young people that face loneliness or poor living conditions. This is achieved by involving them in the community as volunteers and thus reducing the feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Civil society organisations dealing with loneliness and isolation, youth organisations, national volunteer development agencies, and volunteer centres have been recognised as relevant stakeholders for providing support. Therefore, they should be supported to 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 youths affected by loneliness and isolation.

RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS

The social changes that the COVID-19 crisis created, should not be underestimated. We need to build better connected societies and break down the barriers that make some young people feel excluded, isolated, and lonely. To recognise 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 agenda. Sufficient resources must be allocated for awareness raising campaigns that use narratives that challenge stereotypes, address the consequences on personal well-being and also reach and motivate young people to use volunteering as a tool for combating loneliness, isolation and thus social exclusion.

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