

Decolonising EU Funding Mechanisms for Youth

Policy Paper

1. Introduction

This policy paper has been produced by young participants and International Voluntary Service (IVS) organisations from all regions of the world under the Decolonise IVS! project to reflect on concepts around solidarity and decolonization¹ and the changes that are needed for this.

In this document, we offer a **critical reflection on the neo-colonial mechanisms** in the funding structures of the European Union (EU), mainly Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes.

Additionally, we propose recommendations on how to decolonise decision making processes, as well as funding and reporting requirements and how to build global solidarity among youth organizations.

2. Rationale for action

In the worldwide context of persisting wars, social injustices and deep inequalities, civil society and political systems have the responsibility to work for the legitimisation of democratic institutions and the promotion of mechanisms that generate inclusion, social justice, and sustainability, while enforcing human rights. To truly promote these values, it is necessary to embrace a decolonizing perspective by reviewing and transforming all aspects that reinforce asymmetries between countries and regions. In fact, even if the process of colonisation is a thing of the past, coloniality persists in relations between states.

Coloniality can be defined as a distribution of power reproduced through racial, gender and economic relations.² It is in the decision-making and power dynamics around the allocation and distribution of financial resources by donors³ that the perpetuation of these inequalities is most evident.⁴

¹This document's inconsistencies in the spelling of "decolonization/decolonisation" and other words and expressions is intentional. Diverse spelling reflects the fact that decolonial thinking and actions are made by participants coming from a variety of backgrounds and involve questioning anglicism as a colonial legacy itself. Editing for 'consistency' would silence and erase the diverse and inclusive participation that is critically needed by the decolonial movement in order to be successful.

²Quijano, A. 2000. *Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America*. In *International sociology*, 15(2), pp. 215-232.

³Of the 260.358 foundations analysed, only 47 were in Africa while the majority was found in Europe and North America. Johnson, P.D. 2018. Global Philanthropy Report – Perspectives on the global foundation sector, pp. 13f.

⁴Mignolo, W.D. and Walsh, C.E. 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press.

The allocation of funding streams and the rules embedded in those financial patterns play a fundamental role in the perpetuation of neo-colonial relationships. Analysing the existing European funding mechanisms and how they can be transformed in alignment with solidarity, equality, and the human rights that the EU officially subscribes to, is therefore key. So far though, funding relationships between the European Commission (EC) – managing the Erasmus+ as well as the European Solidarity Corps programmes – and youth organisations operating outside of the European borders are often rooted in models which uphold colonialist power structures.

Such structures are for example visible in the persistence of a ‘Northern’ or ‘Western’ logic, considered as universal. This form of neo-colonialism is based on the idea that Europe sets the social, economic, and cultural standards from which former colonies depart.⁵

Despite attempts to include the voices of countries from the so called ‘Global South’⁶ in calls and proposals, the perpetuation of

neo-colonial mechanisms of unequal power relations, the non-recognition of the colonial past and discourses carving a Eurocentric and binary world perception continue.⁷

This is also visible in the legal financial and visa barriers that European Solidarity Corps volunteers from outside Europe face when wanting to volunteer in the EU. The corresponding vision of progress and development includes a set of discourses closely connected to a neoliberal vision of economic growth⁸ and a logic of progress that has been developed mostly from the centres of power and thought in Europe and Northern America.

Associated with this is an attempt to erase or invisibilise local and indigenous knowledge, experiences, and know-how.

This depreciation of practices that are not European in origin is reflected, for example, in the structural racialisation⁹ of people. People racialised as ‘white’ keep being implied as ‘normal’ and ascribed socio-economic privileges, while people racialised as black, indigenous, or of colour often suffer stigma, exclusion, disadvantages, and oppression.

⁵ <https://forum-ids.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/JOB024-IVCO-2021-Think-Pieces-V5.pdf> and El-Lahib, Y. 2015. *The inadmissible “other”: Discourses of ableism and colonialism in Canadian immigration.* in *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 26(3), pp.209-228.

⁶ In this paper, the term ‘Global South’ refers to all countries outside the 32-member Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which represents the ‘Global North’.

⁷ Brouwers, A. and Le Ber, E. 2020. The Neo-Colonial Europeanization of Africa. A post-development perspective on the communication of the AU-EU Partnership. pp. 4.

⁸ See the critical analysis of the EU fiscal policy: 220420-Fiscal-Policy-Position-Paper.pdf (youthforum.org)

⁹ “We employ the term racialisation to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group”. Omi, M. & Winant, H. 1986. *Racial Formation in the United States/1960s-1980s*, pp. 64.

The same can be said for each ‘colonially produced’ or aggravated power dimension: like e.g. class, gender, sexual orientation, neuro-physical ability. When this colonial logic finds its way into EU policies, they have the effect of reproducing the discrimination, social inequity, and exclusion they are designed to combat.

Since the end of colonisation during the 1950s and 1960s, the EU has been going through a post-colonial period, which it is important to recognise. It is therefore all the more relevant to identify those policies, structures, and mechanisms that still **perpetuate neo-colonial approaches**.

This even more so, as the EU has the capacity and normative power¹⁰ to “shape conceptions of ‘normal’ in international relations”¹¹ and appropriate the values it subscribes to as ‘European’, giving its foreign policy the objective of ‘exporting’ these values and principles among other countries.¹²

When the EU is positioning itself as such a normative power, it reproduces coloniality by refusing to acknowledge and value the perspectives of previously colonised countries, ignoring the damage caused by

the European colonial powers and failing to recognise other forms of development. For this reason, the EU assumption of normative power has often been interpreted as ‘soft imperialism’.¹³

For the EU to build a more inclusive and global order for the next generations, it is key to critically analyse the neo-colonial and exclusionary practices it perpetuates, to promote a diffusion of norms based on dialogue and negotiation while respecting the values of the Other.¹⁴

Following what is happening in many sectors of civil society, in the arts and academia, European institutions now have the chance to break with their colonial past by pro-actively embracing a committed practice of public reckoning, reparations and compensations¹⁵ and reversing funding flows where most of which remains in the ‘Global North’.¹⁶

¹⁰ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/15687_en

¹¹ Manners, I. 2002. *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?* Journal of Common Market Studies, 40, pp. 239

¹² One of the six priorities of the European Commission is ‘Promoting our European way of life’, [Priorities 2019-2024 - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹³ Hettne, B. and Söderbaum, F. 2005. *Civilian power or soft imperialism? The EU as a global actor and the role of interregionalism.* in European Foreign Affairs Review, 10(4).

¹⁴ Manners, I. & Whitman, R. 2003. *The “difference engine”: constructing and representing the international identity of the European Union.* in Journal of European Public Policy, 10:3, pp. 380-404.

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/28/germany-agrees-to-pay-namibia-11bn-over-historical-herero-nama-genocide>

¹⁶ [Human Rights Funders Network - Trust Gap Report \(hrfn.org\)](#), pp. 12-15.

3. Policy Recommendations

Our following recommendations are first steps to decolonize funding directed towards youth organizations by strengthening the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ programmes with the aim to contribute to the principles of freedom, participation, solidarity, equality, and human rights.

We acknowledge the importance of such programmes for funding projects in the areas of education, training, youth, and sport, their priorities of inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, environmental conservation and fight against climate change, as well as participation in democratic life and civic engagement.¹⁷ The partners of Decolonise IVS! also welcome their strong international dimension to contribute **“to human and institutional development, digital transition, growth and jobs, good governance and peace and security”**.¹⁸

Yet, to implement this vision and the values of the EU, more steps are needed, as explained in our recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Decolonise decision-making processes.

Ensure the engagement of a diversity of youth organisations in decision-making processes on the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps funding actions.

Participation of young people in decision-making is one of the 11 goals of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 that explicitly aims to **“strengthen young people’s democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society”**.¹⁹

The decolonization of decision-making processes includes placing them in the hands of those people who are directly impacted by the program and “to rebalance the power between funder and grantee, invest in quality relationships, and place greater trust in those doing the work”.²⁰ It also includes rejecting tokenism and addressing adult-centrism as a form of violence against young people.²¹

Funding decisions are usually made by adults far removed from the realities and challenges of young people.

¹⁷[The Erasmus+ Programme Guide | Erasmus+ \(europa.eu\)](#) pp. 7-10.

¹⁸[The Erasmus+ Programme Guide | Erasmus+ \(europa.eu\)](#) pp. 12.

¹⁹[Youth Goal 9](#)

²⁰[The New Humanitarian | Ten efforts to decolonise aid](#)

²¹<https://www.unicef.org/argentina/media/18446/file/Qu%C3%A9%20decimos%20cuando%20hablamos%20de%20violencia%20contra%20ni%C3%B1as,%20ni%C3%B1os%20y%20adolescentes.pdf>

By engaging diverse youth organisations²² from both inside and outside the EU in decision-making processes and transcultural dialogues, the EU will not only fulfill its Youth Goals but also strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of its funding programmes²³ and contribute to its values of equality and human rights.

This involves engaging young people who are **directly impacted by the programmes** in participatory needs assessments, the definition of context-relevant call priorities and topics, the development of selection criteria and funding requirements as well as the implementation and decentralised, equity-oriented evaluations²⁴ of projects.

In line with goal 11 and its target to “ensure sufficient resources from EU programmes for youth organisations to develop projects and access structural support to carry out their missions and to support their work”²⁵, we support the recommendation of the European Youth Forum (YFJ) to “establish an Erasmus+ stakeholder group with representative youth organizations and beneficiaries, convening at least twice a year with the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) and the

European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) to discuss developments in the implementation of Erasmus+ activities funded through direct management”.²⁶ This stakeholder group should include at least 30% of grassroots youth organisations or networks from regions outside of Europe to address the key issues young people all over the world are facing. Global issues such as climate justice must be solved by a consensus of all regions of the world, not just one.

Recommendation 2: Engage youth organizations from outside of Europe.

Facilitate exchanges of youth organisations to build solidarity and contribute to peace.

Young people are key in shaping our societies and contributing to addressing the topics relevant to them and their future. To address global issues like civic engagement, peace, and solidarity as well as climate and social justice, it is key to bring young people from all over the world together to challenge neo-colonial mindsets, practices, and systems that still shape power dynamics between countries. Decolonization is impossible without the distinct Other.

²² To avoid tokenism, it is key to ensure that these youth organisations represent a diversity of youth, including indigenous groups.

²³ Even very traditional donors like the World Bank are already building more and more on community led programmes as an effective approach to address poverty, inequality, climate change etc: “The approach of partnering with communities and local units of government, including putting resources under the direct control of community groups, has led to the efficient and inclusive delivery of basic services, and, when

sustained over time, measurable reductions in poverty, particularly among the poorest populations and communities.”

²⁴ <https://globalchange.center/en/2023/08/30/equity-oriented-evaluation-to-transform-the-international-cooperation-industry/>

²⁵ Youth Goal 11

²⁶ <https://www.youthforum.org/news/the-future-of-the-erasmus-programme>, pp. 3.

To decolonize funding decisions, it is therefore key for the EC to reserve project funds that are directly available to youth organisations in countries that are still excluded by Erasmus+. Instead of channelling the money through EU-based organizations, these project funds should contribute to reparatory and compensatory programs targeting former colonised countries.²⁷

While other EU funding programmes like the EU Development Education and Awareness Raising (DEAR) Programme or the Horizon programme also have a priority on youth engagement, their grants are too big for youth organizations to absorb them with their regular structures. Hence it would be important to offer smaller grants that are defined in close coordination with youth organisations and networks. Moreover, the Key Action 2 (KA2) of the Erasmus+ Programme on cooperation among organizations and institutions should include eligible countries from all regions while the European Solidarity Corps programme should be open to an equal amount of young people from inside and outside the EU, including accession countries, and convert into a truly Global Solidarity Corps.

²⁷ In the “Youth - Projects contracted under calls 2022” there were only 4 projects out of 4.816 that were assigned directly to ‘third countries not associated to the programme’ with 19 organisations involved – in comparison to 22.236 EU based youth organisation. They received 685.042 Euro out of 269.816.986 Euro for the projects (0.25%). See European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture (2023). [Erasmus+ annual report 2022](#) – Annex. Publications Office of the European Union.

Recommendation 3: Decolonise funding and reporting requirements.

Simplify Erasmus+ funding to make it accessible and manageable for youth organisations from inside and outside the EU.

Research commissioned by the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) reiterates in its analysis that improvements to the ‘youth’ part of the Erasmus+ funding programme are needed - specifically:



simplification, including the proposal form, and more straightforward guidance in plain language.²⁸



So far, accountability and information sharing are still shaped by Euro-centric and neo-liberal ways of knowledge generation²⁹ (such as relying on log frames with narrowly defined indicators of ‘success’, applying linear thinking regarding change processes and focusing on efficiency instead of transformation).

²⁸ [EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: First lessons, challenges and future perspectives : Erasmus+](#)

²⁹ [Renzo Guinto \(2019\): “Territorial colonialism may be long over, but the colonisation of the mind, of culture, of domestic politics and of the economy continues and reparations are yet to be realised”.](#)

Application processes are not only very complicated but also time-consuming. That is without counting the existing structural obstacles youth organisations face - from political instability to unreliable infrastructure, which can be systematically traced back to colonial depredation, destruction, and disruptions.

The EC should therefore revise and test – together with the stakeholder group on Erasmus+ mentioned above – its application and reporting requirements while implementing the feedback from grassroots organizations working with and for youth.

Application proposals and reporting processes need to be simplified, transparent, and aligned with the realities of young people, rather than reproducing internal bureaucratic procedures of European institutional bodies or Eurocentric national administrations.

This should include offering **onsite and online courses on how to use the funding portal** – tied to reformed and simplified systems – as this is one of the biggest barriers for youth organisations.

To support youth organisations during the application process, it would be useful to collect **a first round of short concept papers** (maximum of five pages) followed by dedicated coaching provided in a variety of local languages to prepare the full application proposal.³⁰

Especially for the youth programmes under Erasmus+, programme imperatives to achieve goals, outcomes and output often detract from the real, genuine, and meaningful processes that projects and youth organisations can achieve.

Quantity over quality; time over process; productivity indicators over learning indicators – it is necessary to revise those standards set out in the Erasmus+ calls so that they are more realistic, context-specific, and adjusted to the possibilities and needs of the youth organisations with the aim of achieving social and democratic transformation.

Last but not least, it is vital that funding includes **reimbursement for all operational costs** of youth organizations such as travel costs, knowledge access and translation services. Such flexible, core and longer-term funding enables youth organizations to plan, and respond to new challenges and opportunities and gives them more power to define and work sustainably on selected priorities. Decolonised funding structures come with the additional benefit of considering and assuming accountability for the day-to-day navigation of structural disadvantages that young people from formerly colonised contexts (existing inside and outside of Europe) or in transnational ways, constantly face.

successfully apply. Another example includes: [Free Virtual Trainings: How to Use GovGrants, Our New Grants Portal - Inter-American Foundation \(iaf.gov\)](#).

³⁰The Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec) for example starts with a short concept paper and checks the requirements with what they call a feasibility study. The selected projects/partners are then coached in how to

One way to ensure this is to increase the unrestricted funding within the application for funds and to give applicants the scope to also move between budget lines.

In the context of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations, the EU needs to ensure that a **diversity of youth organisations are able to contribute to the shaping of and reinforcement of the Erasmus+ Programme**. This could be in form of a new funding line for a Global Programme that would allow for a dedicated financial allocation to support youth organisations and networks from outside of the EU while

also including South-South collaborations of youth organisations. This Global Programme should be co-created in a **decentralised way with youth organizations from all over the world** and include 're-granting' schemes and flexibility for the beneficiary when distributing the financial resources with less administrative constraints. Such a programme should also include the possibility for ongoing support and follow-up to projects as well as funds when successful approaches are upscaled. It would also be interesting if it incorporated micro-credits microcredits and small grants to support grassroots youth-led initiatives and social enterprises, facilitating experimentation and rapid iteration.

To close, we strongly support YFJ's demand to **double the current budget of the Erasmus + Programme to EUR 52 billion** as well as "an increase of the commitment of the programme budget for youth to at least 15%, from the current 10%".³¹



Coordinating Partners



Partners



Associated Partners



All views and opinions expressed in this policy paper are of the project partners only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Council of Europe. Neither the European Union nor Council of Europe can be held responsible for them. **For more information**, please contact Ms. Anja Stuckert at anja.stuckert@icye.org or Ms. Mariela Ortiz Suarez at marielaortizsuarez@fundses.org.ar.

³¹ <https://www.youthforum.org/news/the-future-of-the-erasmus-programme>, pp. 2.