Decolonising the Funding Mechanisms of European Union Youth Programmes

Policy Paper

1.   Introduction

This policy paper[1] 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 decolonization[2] and the changes that are needed for this.

> In this article, we offer a **critical reflection on the neo-colonial mechanisms** that persist in the funding structures of the European Union (EU), in particular in the youth programmmes of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.

Additionally, we propose recommendations on how to decolonise decision-making processes, funding and accountability requirements, and how to build global solidarity among IVS organisations.

2.   Rationale for action

In a global context of persistent war, social injustice and deep inequality, civil society and political systems have a responsibility to work to consolidate democratic institutions and promote mechanisms that generate inclusion, social justice and sustainability, while upholding human rights. To truly promote these values, it is necessary to adopt a decolonising perspective, examining and transforming all aspects that reinforce asymmetries between countries and between regions. Although the process of decolonization may be a thing of the past, decoloniality persists in the relations between states and their societies.

According to Peruvian sociologist and philosopher Aníbal Quijano, coloniality

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[1] This document is also available in French and Spanish. You can access the translations here.
[2] This 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 to be successful.

refers to the enduring structures of power, knowledge and being that persist even after the end of formal colonial rule.[3] According to this definition, decolonisation is not only a political or economic process, but also involves questioning and transforming the deeply rooted structures of power, knowledge and identity that colonialism has left behind.

It is in the decision-making process and in the power dynamics surrounding the distribution of financial resources by donors[4] that the perpetuation of these inequalities is most evident.[5] The allocation of funds and the rules embedded in these regimes play a key role in the perpetuation of neo-colonial relations.

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.[6]

It results in a lack of inclusion of the voices of the so-called 'Global South'[7] in the calls for projects, which are based on a vision of progress and neo-liberal development, mainly established in the centres of power and thought in Europe and North America[8] but which does not recognise other forms of progress.[9]

The devaluing of these non-European practices is reflected, for example, in the structural racialisation[10] of peoples. People racialised as 'white' are still considered the norm and enjoy socio-economic privileges,

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

[4] Of the 260.358 foundations analysed, only 47 were in Africa, and most were in Europe and North America. Johnson, P.D. 2018. Global Philanthropy Report – Perspectives on the global foundation sector. pp. 13f.

[5] Mignolo, W.D. & Walsh, C.E. 2018. On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis. Duke University Press.

[6] https://forum-ids.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/JOB024-IVCO-2021-Think-Pieces-V5.pdf & 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.

[7] In this document, the term 'Global South' refers to all countries that do not belong to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has 32 members and represents the 'Global North'.

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

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

[10] "We use the term racialisation to refer to the extension of racial meaning to a relationship, social practice or group that was not previously racially classified". Omi, M. & Winant, H. 1986. Racial Formation in the United States / From the 1960s to the 1980s. pp. 64.

while people racialised as 'indigenous', 'black' or 'coloured' often suffer stigmatisation, exclusion, disadvantage and oppression. The same is true of all the dimensions of power mapped out by coloniality, such as class, gender, sexual orientation and neurophysical abilities. When this colonial logic creeps into EU policies, it has the effect of reproducing the discrimination, social inequality and exclusion that they are supposed to combat.

To build a more inclusive and global order for the next generations, it is essential that all stakeholders critically review any possible neo-colonial and exclusionary practices, to promote a spread of rules based on dialogue and negotiation, respecting the values of all cultures. It is essential to analyse existing European funding mechanisms and see how they can be transformed to align with the solidarity, equality and human rights to which the EU officially subscribes.

Since the end of colonial relations between countries in the 1950s and 1960s, the EU has been going through a post-colonial period that is important to recognise. It is therefore all the more pertinent to identify the policies, structures and mechanisms that continue **to perpetuate neo-colonial approaches**.

This is all the more the case given the fact that the EU has a normative power[11] to "define conceptions of 'normal' in international relations"[12]. It has the capacity to appropriate the values it subscribes to by describing them as 'European' and giving its foreign policy the objective of 'exporting' these values and principles to other countries.[13] If the EU is to use its influence abroad to build a more inclusive world order for future generations, it is essential to critically analyse the neo-colonial and exclusionary practices that persist in the financial mechanisms of its programmes, and to promote the spread of norms based on dialogue and negotiation, recognising and valuing cultures outside the Eurocentric canons.[14]

We recognise the importance of these programmes to fund projects in the fields of education, training, youth and sport, inclusion, diversity, digital transformation, environmental preservation and the fight against climate change, as well as participation in democratic life and civic engagement.[15] The member organisations of the Decolonise IVS! project value the international dimension of the Erasmus+ programme and its objectives, which contribute to "**human and institutional development, digital transition, growth and employment, good governance,**

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[11] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/15687_en
[12] Manners, I. 2002. *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?* Journal of Common Market Studies, 40, 235-258. pp. 239
[13] One of the European Commission's six priorities is "promoting our European way of life", Priorities 2019-2024 - European Commission

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

peace and security".[16] Thanks to this perspective, the project was possible. However, we want to generate contributions to this vision and bet on a dialogic, horizontal practice between project funding policies, actors to review the processes and their impact on peacebuilding.

> 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 compensations[17] and reversing funding flows where most of which remains in the 'Global North'.[18]

3.   Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are the first steps to decolonise the funding of youth organisations, reinforcing the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ programmes with the aim of contributing to the principles of freedom, participation, solidarity, equality and human rights.

Recommendation 1: Decolonise decision-making processes.

> *Ensure the participation of a diversity of youth organisations in decision-making processes concerning Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps funding actions.*

Youth participation in decision-making is one of the 11 objectives of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which explicitly aims to "**strengthen democratic participation and empowerment of young people and provide youth-friendly spaces in all spheres of society**".[19]

Decolonizing the decision-making process means entrusting it to the people directly affected by the programme and "rebalancing the power between funder and grantee, investing in quality relationships and placing greater trust in those who carry out the work".[20] It also involves rejecting tokenism and recognising adultcentrism as a form of violence against young people.[21]

Funding decisions are often made by adults who are far removed from the

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[16] The Erasmus+ Programme Guide | Erasmus+ (europa.eu) pp. 12.
[17] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/28/germany-agrees-to-pay-namibia-11bn-over-historical-herero-nama-genocide
[18] Human Rights Funders Network - Trust Gap Report (hrfn.org), pp. 12-15.

[19] Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for All
[20] The New Humanitarian | Ten efforts to decolonise aid
[21] UNICEF, What do we say when we talk about violence against children and adolescents?, 2023

realities and challenges faced by young people.

> By involving youth organisations[22] from inside and outside the EU in decision-making processes and intercultural dialogues, the EU will not only achieve its youth objectives, but also strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of its funding programmes[23] and contribute to its values of equality and human rights.

This involves the participation of young people directly affected by the programmes in needs assessment, the definition of priorities and themes for context-specific calls for projects, the elaboration of selection criteria and funding conditions, as well as decentralised and equity-focused project implementation and evaluation.[24]

In line with Objective 11 and its aim to "ensure sufficient resources from EU programmes for youth organisations to develop projects and access structural support to carry out their missions and sustain their work"[25], we support the recommendation of the European Youth Forum (YFJ) to "establish an Erasmus+ Stakeholder Group with representative youth organisations and beneficiaries, to meet at least twice a year with the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) and the European Executive Agency for Education and Culture (EACEA) to discuss the progress of the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme activities funded through direct management"[26].

This stakeholder group should include at least 30% of youth organisations or networks from non-European regions, in order to address the key issues facing young people around the world. Global issues such as climate justice must be solved by consensus from all regions of the world, not just one.

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[22] To avoid any tokenism, it is essential to ensure that these organisations represent a diversity of young people, including indigenous groups.
[23] Even very traditional donors, such as the World Bank, are increasingly emphasising community-based programmes as an effective approach to tackling 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] Global Change, Equity-oriented evaluation to transform the international cooperation industry, 2023.
[25] Youth Goal #11: Youth Organisations & European Programmes
[26] European Youth Forum, The future of the Erasmus+ Programme, 2024, pp. 3.

Recommendation 2: Involve youth organisations from outside Europe.

> *Facilitate exchanges between youth organisations to strengthen solidarity and contribute to peace.*

Young people play a key role in shaping our societies and contribute to addressing issues that concern them and their future. To address global issues such as civic engagement, peace and solidarity, and climate and social justice, it is essential to bring together young people from around the world to challenge the neo-colonial mindsets, practices and systems that still shape the power dynamics between countries. Decolonization is a relational concept and is impossible without an 'Other'.

Therefore, in order to decolonise funding decisions, it is essential that the EC allocate available funds directly to youth organisations in countries that remain excluded from the Erasmus+ programme, without going through a European organisation. Instead of channelling money to EU-based organisations, **these funds should contribute to reparations and compensation programmes targeted at former colonised countries**.[27]

In addition, Key Action 2 (K2) of the Erasmus+ programme on cooperation between organisations and institutions should include eligible countries from all regions, while the European Solidarity Corps programme should be open to an equal number of young people from inside and outside the EU, including candidate countries, and be transformed into a fully-fledged **World Solidarity Corps**.

Also, although other EU funding programmes, such as the European Development Education and Awareness Raising Programme (DEAR) or the Horizon programme, also prioritise youth participation, their grants are too large for youth organisations to absorb within their usual structures. It would therefore be important to propose smaller grants, defined in close cooperation with youth organisations and networks.

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[27] Under "Youth - Projects contracted under the 2022 calls", only 4 out of 4,816 projects were awarded directly to "third countries not associated to the programme", with 19 participating organisations, compared to 22,236 EU-based youth organisations. They received 685,042 euros out of the 269,816,986 euros earmarked for projects (0.25%). See European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2023). Erasmus+ 2022 Annual Report - Annex. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/090374

Recommendation 3: Decolonise funding and reporting requirements.

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

A study commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) reiterates in its analysis the need to improve the 'youth' strand of the Erasmus+ funding programme in particular:

> simplification, including the proposal form, and more direct guidance in clear and simple language.[28]

Until now, accountability and information sharing have been determined by neoliberal methods of knowledge production[29] (such as relying on logical frameworks with narrowly defined indicators of 'success', applying linear thinking to change processes, and focusing

on efficiency rather than transformation), which are not adapted to youth organisations inside and outside the EU. Application processes are not only complex but also time-consuming. Added to this are the structural obstacles faced by youth organisations based in Europe but also abroad, from political instability to the lack of reliable infrastructure.

Therefore, the EC should review and test - in cooperation with the Erasmus+ Stakeholder Group mentioned above - its application and reporting requirements while implementing the feedback from organisations working with and for young people. **Application and reporting processes should be simplified, transparent and tailored to the realities of young people**.

This should include **the provision of face-to-face and online courses on how to use the funding portal** - linked to reformed and simplified systems - as this is one of the biggest obstacles for youth organizations.

To support these organisations during the application process, it would be useful to compile **an initial set of short concept papers** (maximum five pages), followed by specific guidance provided in various local languages to prepare the full application proposal.[30]

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[28] CULT Committee, EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports, 2023.

[29] Renzo Guinto (2019): "Territorial colonialism may have ended long ago, but the colonisation of the

mind, culture, domestic politics and economy still continues, and repairs have yet to be made".

[30] The Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec), for example, starts with a short concept paper and verifies the requirements through what it calls a feasibility study. Selected

Especially in the case of youth programmes under Erasmus+, the imperatives of achieving targets, outcomes and outputs often divert attention from the real, authentic and meaningful processes that projects and youth organisations can achieve.

Quantity instead of quality, short time frames instead of sustained processes, productivity indicators instead of learning indicators: these standards defined in the Erasmus+ project calls need to be revised to make them more realistic, context-specific and adapted to the possibilities and needs of youth organisations with the aim of achieving social and democratic transformation.

Finally, it is essential that funding includes **reimbursement of all operational costs** for youth organisations, such as travel expenses, access to knowledge and translation services. This type of flexible, ongoing and longer-term funding enables youth organisations to plan and respond to new challenges and opportunities, and empowers them to define and work sustainably on selected priorities. Decolonised funding structures should have the added advantage of taking into account and taking responsibility for the

structural disadvantages that young people from previously colonised (existing within and outside Europe) or transnational contexts constantly face.

One way to achieve this is to increase the amount of unallocated funds in the funding request and to give applicants the opportunity to move from one budget line to another.

In the context of the forthcoming negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034, the EU must ensure that a diversity of youth organisations can contribute to the development and reinforcement of the Erasmus+ programme. This could take the form of a new funding line for a global programme that would allow for a specific financial allocation to support youth organisations and networks outside the EU, while including South-South collaboration between youth organisations.

Such a global programme should be set up on **a decentralised basis with youth organisations around the world** and include 'reallocation' systems and flexibility for the beneficiary to distribute financial resources with fewer administrative constraints. Such a programme should also include the possibility of ongoing project

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projects/partners are then supported in their application. Another example is the Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec): Free

Virtual Trainings: How to Use GovGrants, Our New Grants Portal - Inter-American Foundation (iaf.gov)

support and follow-up, as well as funding when successful approaches are scaled up. It could also incorporate micro-credits and small grants to support local youth-led initiatives and social enterprises, facilitating experimentation and rapid iteration.

In conclusion, we strongly support the YFJ's call for **a doubling of the current Erasmus+ programme budget to 52 billion euros**, as well as **"an increase of the commitment of the programme budget for youth to at least 15%, from the current 10%"**[31]. This budget increase would help to achieve the recommendations set out above, i.e. the inclusion of more young people in the programme's decision-making processes, not only in Europe but worldwide, and more flexible funding requirements for youth organisations.

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[31] European Youth Forum, The future of the Erasmus+ Programme, 2023, p. 3.