

COMECE contribution to the public consultation on the European Solidarity Corps

The European Solidarity Corps shall help young people to foster their commitment in society to the most in need. To attain this goal, COMECE encourages the European Union to quickly provide an own funding line for the new scheme and to set up a legislative framework based on a wider strategy on volunteering.

COMECE supports the general idea of creating a European Solidarity Corps (ESC) as it enables young people to strengthen their critical role in society. *"With their dreams and their lives, young people are forging the spirit of Europe"*, underlined Pope Francis when accepting the Charlemagne Prize last year.¹ He stressed the need to offer young people possibilities to become the protagonists for change and transformation in society.² As a complement to already existing programmes, the ESC can help young people to take up this role in lending their *"own personal efforts for the good of the community in general and, in particular, for the good of the weakest and neediest"*³. However, with a view to ensure the sustainability of the scheme and its interaction with existing programmes, COMECE encourages the EU to consider the following five recommendations:

- 1. Build the Solidarity Corps on clear objectives.** While the new youth scheme should be open to all young people in the EU between 18-30 years, especially to those from a disadvantaged background, its objectives should be clearly defined. The forthcoming legislation should provide a list of solidarity-related activities that are applicable to the European Solidarity Corps. In addition, COMECE proposes to build the scheme on the objective of fostering the sense of community life of young people. This will benefit both the young who will gain new skills and experiences as well as the people in need who will receive a better assistance.
- 2. Provide additional funding and a separate legal basis.** The introduction of the European Solidarity Corps should not be to the detriment of other already existing exchange and volunteering programmes in Europe. COMECE therefore recommends to provide an own budget-line as well as a separate legal framework for the scheme. The forthcoming legislation should therefore quickly replace the current system and stop redirecting funding from EU programmes, which are all already based on a tight budget.
- 3. Incorporate the Solidarity Corps in a wider strategy on volunteering.** COMECE recommends to avoid duplication with already existing and well-functioning programmes. The European Solidarity Corps should therefore be designed in such a

¹ Pope Francis, *Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize – Address of His Holiness Pope Francis*, 2016: <http://bit.ly/24BFExe>.

² Ibid.

³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2006, para 420: <http://bit.ly/IHnkOw>.

way that it complements those programmes. The European Commission, especially, has not yet clearly shown the difference between the voluntary strand of the ESC and the European Voluntary Service. Moreover, the new scheme should support and complement volunteering activities of Churches, Church-based organisations, and other civil society actors, which often have a long-standing tradition and experience in volunteering.

- 4. Keep a clear separation between the voluntary and the occupational strand.** Volunteering enables young people to improve their skills and to contribute to society. However, *“[i]f civic volunteer service helps foster their sense of community, it is not rewarded with [...] guaranteed work, therefore it should not exempt societal actors from their responsibility to the young generation”*⁴. The European Commission should therefore prevent that the voluntary strand will be used to replace employment with unpaid work.
- 5. Ensure a simplified access to funding.** Many Church and other civil society organisations that work on solidarity-based activities are run on limited resources. The European Solidarity Corps should thus be designed in such a way to keep the administrative burden for the young applicants as well as for the participating organisations to a minimum. The accreditation, placement as well as funding application process should be as simple as possible. This will allow many small organisations, which through their everyday work promote solidarity in Europe, to take part in the programme.

*COMECE Secretariat
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The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) brings together the Bishop delegates from the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union's Member States. For more than thirty years now, COMECE has been closely involved in the process of European integration and offering its reflections. COMECE is a partner of the EU institutions in the Dialogue foreseen by Article 17(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Its permanent General Secretariat⁵, based in Brussels, analyses EU policies on a day-by-day basis, striving to bring the specific contribution of the Catholic Church into the debate.

⁴ Standing Committee of the French Bishops' Conference, *Dans un monde qui change – retrouver le sens du politique (English translation)*, 2016: <http://bit.ly/2ebi4rz>.

⁵ COMECE Secretariat, 19, Square de Meeûs – B-1050 Brussels. Register ID number: 47350036909-69.