



Brussels, 1.4.2025
COM(2025) 141 final

**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

on the final evaluation of the 2014 – 2020 EU Aid Volunteers Initiative

{SWD(2025) 76 final}

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1. INTRODUCTION

The EU Aid Volunteers initiative ('EUAV Initiative' or 'the Initiative') was an EU programme established by Regulation EU (No) 375/2014¹, which, in accordance with its Article 7, pursued five operational objectives:

- Contribute to increasing and improving the capacity of the Union to provide humanitarian aid.
- Improve the skills, knowledge and competences of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid and the terms and conditions of their engagement.
- Build the capacity of hosting organisations and foster volunteering in third countries.
- Communicate the Union's humanitarian aid principles agreed in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.
- Enhance coherence and consistency of volunteering across Member States in order to improve opportunities for Union citizens to participate in humanitarian aid activities and operations.

In compliance with Article 27(4)(d) of this Regulation, the European Commission has now carried out the final evaluation of the Initiative over the period 2014-2020. This final evaluation was supported by two external studies (carried out in 2021 and from June 2023 to December 2024) and consultations.

The evaluation assessed the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and added value of the Initiative.

The evaluation has concluded that the Initiative had been both: (i) responsive to the needs of the volunteers participating in the Initiative; and (ii) aligned with the objective of improving the skills and knowledge of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid. The Initiative also: (i) responded to the need to support the capacity building of host organisations; (ii) promoted volunteering in non-EU countries; and (iii) provided EU added value by contributing to common standards for humanitarian-aid volunteering across EU Member States. The Initiative made the most of the EU's global presence to improve the deployment of volunteers, providing a platform for people to engage in meaningful humanitarian-aid activities in non-EU countries.

The accompanying staff working document provides details on the evaluation's findings, consultations and methodology.

¹ OJ L 122, 24.4.2014, p. 1–17. This Regulation is no longer in force as it was repealed by Regulation (EU) 2021/888 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU AID VOLUNTEERS INITIATIVE

When entering in force in 2009, Article 214(5) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU provided for the creation of the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (EVHAC), the objective of which was to set up a ‘framework for joint contributions from young Europeans to the Humanitarian Aid operations of the Union’.

In 2014, the EUAV Initiative was set up by Regulation (EU) No 375/2014. The overall objective of the Initiative was to contribute to increasing and improving the EU’s capacity to provide needs-based humanitarian aid aimed at: (i) preserving life; (ii) preventing and alleviating human suffering; (iii) maintaining human dignity; and (iv) strengthening the capacity and resilience of vulnerable or disaster-affected communities in third countries (particularly through disaster preparedness, disaster-risk reduction and better links between disaster relief, disaster rehabilitation and development).

Regulation (EU) No 375/2014 stated that the actions of the EUAV Initiative should be conducted in compliance with the humanitarian-aid principles (i.e. humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence) and and the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid². The Regulation also said the actions of the Initiative should aim to: (i) respond to the needs of local communities and the requirements of the hosting organisations; (ii) ensure the safety and security of candidate volunteers; (iii) promote transnational partnerships; and and (iv) contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of the humanitarian sector.

The EUAV Initiative brought together volunteers and organisations from different countries, and aimed to incentivise and foster: (i) collaboration; (ii) the exchange of knowledge and good practices; and (iii) the building of partnerships between organisations in the field of humanitarian aid.

The European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) was responsible for the practical implementation of the EUAV Initiative (i.e. for calls for proposals, contract management, budget appropriation, etc.). The programme was managed until 2020 by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), and for the legacy projects that continued in 2021 and 2022, by the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). The Initiative was phased out at the end of 2020 (but the implementation of ongoing projects continued until 2022) and integrated into the European Solidarity Corps.

3. MAIN EVALUATION FINDINGS

Based on the Commission’s **Better Regulation Guidelines**³, the evaluation draws on the evidence provided by two external studies, the first one carried out in 2021⁴ and the second

² https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/european-consensus_en : Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation-why-and-how/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en.

one carried out in 2023-2024⁵. The evaluation concluded with an **overall positive assessment** of the Initiative across all evaluation criteria.

⁴ ADE (2021). Ex-post evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1d172a85-0b96-11ec-adb1-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

⁵ Interim evaluation for the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps, final evaluation for the 2018-2020 European Solidarity Corps and final evaluation for the 2014-2020 EU Aid Volunteers Initiative. Available at <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/5736339>

3.1. Relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency – to what extent has the EUAV Initiative been successful?

Relevance

Main findings

- The EUAV Initiative **aligned with the need to promote capacity building in hosting organisations**, as it provided timely and necessary support and expertise to partner organisations.
- It was also **well-aligned with the need to improve EU volunteering within the humanitarian-aid field** by employing a comprehensive approach. Most organisations surveyed by the evaluation agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative had addressed persisting needs in the less-developed countries.
- The Initiative also: (i) **addressed the central needs and concerns of participating volunteers and host organisations**; (ii) improved the transversal skills of these volunteers and host organisations; (iii) built an understanding of the needs and challenges of the less-developed countries; and (iv) addressed the need to prepare people for careers in international development.

Coherence

Main findings

- The EUAV Initiative **was complementary to other EU programmes** (including the European Solidarity Corps, the former European Voluntary Service and Erasmus+) due to its wider geographical scope and the specific types of activities it organised.
- Although the Initiative's objectives were coherent and aligned with the EU's humanitarian agenda, there was limited evidence of synergies between the Initiative's activities and other EU activities in the areas of humanitarian aid.
- The Initiative was perceived by stakeholders as coherent with national policies in host countries. Informal links between the Initiative and some volunteer networks within EU Member States were observed.
- Stakeholders highly valued the Initiative for strengthening local capacities, particularly through training.

The latest evaluation study found that the Initiative was complementary to other EU programmes offering volunteering activities due to its wider geographical scope and specific types of activities. Like the European Solidarity Corps, the Initiative was concerned with solidarity but with a focus on humanitarian action in non-EU countries.

Although the EUAV Initiative's objectives were coherent and aligned with the EU's humanitarian agenda, the evaluation found limited evidence of synergies between the Initiative's activities and other EU activities in the areas of humanitarian aid. A major challenge, as noted in the previous evaluation study, is that security concerns prevented volunteers from being deployed to regions where EU humanitarian-aid efforts were underway during disasters. The coherence of the Initiative with other EU humanitarian actions was limited by: (i) the fact that volunteers could not be deployed to conflict zones⁶; (ii) internal concerns about deploying young volunteers to emergency situations⁷; and (iii) lengthy recruitment and deployment procedures. In addition, as found by the first evaluation study, there was a lack of information among DG ECHO field offices or other EU delegations about the Initiative's activities and limited interactions between them⁸. However, the fact that the Initiative was very small compared with overall EU humanitarian aid (EUR 141 million was allocated to the Initiative for 2014-2020 under EU Regulation EU (No) 375/2014 compared with the European Commission's humanitarian-aid budget of EUR 13.5 billion for the same period⁹) also limits the potential observation of wider synergies.

Effectiveness

Main findings

- **The EUAV Initiative faced substantial challenges in achieving the targeted number of deployments.** Although some of these challenges were subsequently addressed, the Initiative was severely hit by the restrictions on travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of volunteers travelling abroad to work on activities under the Initiative fell by 90% between 2019 and 2020.
- **Individual Initiative participants benefited from improved skills and professional development,** particularly in high-demand areas such as project management and security training before their deployment. These volunteers also got to practice and develop various transversal skills in the development context.
- The Initiative helped organisations to gain increased capacity in disaster-risk reduction and resilience, increasing their visibility, credibility, and operational and communication capacity. Organisations that wished to participate in the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and deploy or host volunteers had to be certified as either sending or hosting organisations. An open call was published in 2015 which allowed organisations to apply until 30 September 2020. By the end of 2020, 74 sending and 296 hosting organisations had been certified.
- **The Initiative benefited the supported communities,** especially those communities that were vulnerable to natural hazards and large migrant flows. The Initiative

⁶ Article 14(3) of EUAV Regulation 375/2014.

⁷ ADE (2021). Ex-post evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, 2014-2020.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ DG ECHO Annual Activity Reports 2014-2020.

provided critically important support to build resilience and disaster-management capabilities in disaster-prone areas.

- The Initiative increased the use of innovative approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as online volunteering, to ensure ongoing community engagement and support.

Efficiency

Main findings

Budget execution and programme management were efficient given the context within which the programme was implemented, with improvements needed in the measuring of outputs and outcomes.

- **Funding was sufficient** as the budget spent was only around 76% of all available funds. This was due in large part to the delays in starting up the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative and delays towards the end of the outbreak of COVID-19.
- **On implementation**, the actual expenditures for the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative were consistent with the share of the budget allocation specified in Regulation EU (No) 375/2014. However, the Initiative failed to meet both its spending targets and its target for the number of participating volunteers. By the end of 2022, funding was secured for 1 192 deployments, equating to 29% of the initial goal of 4 175. Thus, there are doubts that the available funding would have been realistic for the Initiative to achieve all its goals. This indicates that the Initiative allocated 76% of its budget towards achieving 29% of its objectives. Extrapolating this, fulfilling 100% of the target for the number of volunteers deployed would have likely necessitated a much higher budget.
- Moreover, the rationale linking the budget allocation to expected activities and outcomes was unclear. For example, there was no explicit linkage between the budget allocated and the number, duration, outcomes and impacts of volunteer deployments, and this may have led to inefficiencies. Ensuring a more direct connection between these aspects would have potentially contributed to a more cost-effective Initiative.
- Delays in starting up the EUAV Initiative and in implementing it during COVID-19 both contributed to **a low implementation rate of only 29% of the initial goal**.
- **On performance management**, the actual costs per organisation engaged in interventions were 10% lower than originally anticipated in the budget, which indicates some degree of cost-effectiveness.

3.2. EU added value – how has the EUAV Initiative made a difference, and for whom?

Main findings

- The EUAV Initiative **aligned with the need to promote capacity building in hosting organisations**, as it provided timely and necessary support and expertise to partner organisations.
- The Initiative was also **well-aligned with the need for improvements in EU volunteering within the humanitarian-aid field** by employing a comprehensive approach. Most organisations agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative addressed persisting needs within less-developed countries.
- **It addressed the central needs and concerns of participating volunteers and host organisations**, improved their transversal skills, and built an understanding of the needs and challenges of the less-developed countries. It also addressed the need to prepare people for careers in international development.

The initial 2021 evaluation study of the EUAV Initiative found that it was relevant for both organisations and individuals. Nevertheless, the 2021 evaluation study identified areas for improvement, particularly for third parties and the promotion of EU humanitarian principles beyond direct beneficiaries. The latest evaluation study also found that the Initiative was aligned with local governments' disaster-management needs and domestic initiatives. Surveys revealed that the Initiative's main objectives were generally aligned with societal needs, although participants questioned whether the projects effectively increased community resilience or raised awareness of EU humanitarian principles.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Following the launch of the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, participation fell short of expectations. During the 2014-2020 period, the Initiative aimed to support the training of 4 400 volunteers and the deployment of 4 000 volunteers. It also aimed to provide technical assistance and capacity building for participating organisations and carry out communication and support activities. However, by the end of 2022, only 1 192 deployments had been financed (representing 29% of the original target) and 788 deployments had been completed.

The Initiative introduced a rigorous certification mechanism that required sending and hosting organisations to demonstrate they had the necessary procedures and policies to meet the programme's high standards for volunteering activities, which led to ambitious targets for certified organisations and volunteers being trained and deployed, although this mechanism was not in place during the pilot phase. Even if these targets were not fully met, the EUAV Initiative has marked the EU's first steps to support humanitarian-aid volunteering.

To address the challenges faced by the EUAV Initiative, a new humanitarian-aid strand was created within the European Solidarity Corps under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial

framework. This aimed to increase coherence and synergy with the other volunteering actions of the Corps, building on the legacy of the EU Aid Volunteers initiative. By expanding the European Solidarity Corps to include humanitarian aid in non-EU countries, the programme has solidified its role as a unique gateway for young people to engage in volunteering and other solidarity activities. This expansion has also increased the programme's visibility and impact both within the EU and beyond.

At the implementation level, lessons learned from the EUAV Initiative notably the preselection by projects of candidate volunteers before the compulsory centralised training have resulted in significantly simplified access for interested young people and organisations, including improved measures to involve young people with fewer opportunities in volunteering. The programme's quality and support mechanisms have also been strengthened, with additional training and support options available to participants before, during, and after their engagement.

At the implementation level, lessons learned from the 2014-2020 EUAV Initiative have been instrumental for the design of the new humanitarian aid strand of the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps, and particularly in the following areas:

- Thanks to the requirement for interested young people to register and express their interest on the EU Youth Portal, a wider pool of candidate volunteers is available for projects.
- Projects funded under this new strand select volunteers directly from a pool of trained candidate volunteers, in contrast with the EUAV Initiative which required volunteers to be pre-selected by projects before the compulsory centralised initial training. This allows for more transparency and shortens considerably the time span between selection and deployment, with the aim to reduce the number of dropouts and to allow a faster implementation.
- Measures to involve young people with fewer opportunities in volunteering have also improved. Indeed, the inclusive ambition of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes is anchored in their legal bases through a dedicated chapter on inclusion, underpinned by the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for 2020-2027, and through the dedicated Framework of inclusion measures adopted in October 2021.
- The action also benefits from the horizontal support options offered by the European Solidarity Corps, particularly the learning cycle, which includes *inter alia* a General Online training and an Online Linguistic Support, both available on EU Academy to participants before, during, and after their engagement.