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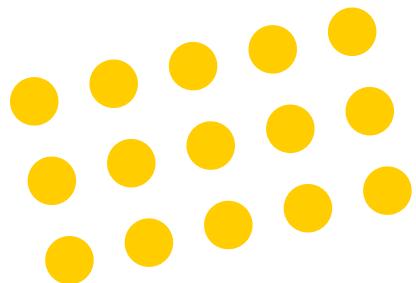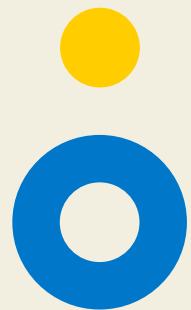
EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY CORPS

Exploring African Relational Ethic of Ubuntu

for Inclusion and Solidarity in the Humanitarian Field

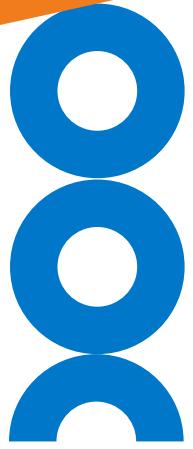UBUNTU · INTERDEPENDENCE · RELATIONAL HERMENEUTICS · ONTOLOGICAL EQUILIBRIUM · INCLUSION · DIFFERENCES

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With expertise in comparative Western and African philosophy, Dr Elvis Imafidon teaches World Philosophies at SOAS University of London. His research interest includes applying theories in African ontology and ethics to understanding lived experiences and practical issues in African societies such as corruption, gender, disability, differences, diversity and inclusion, and personhood. He has published many books in this area, including African Philosophy and the Otherness of Albinism (Routledge 2019) and The Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference (Springer 2020).
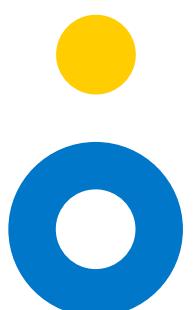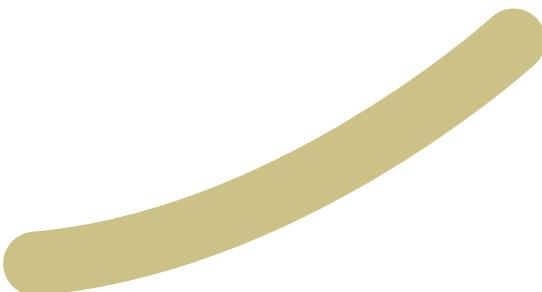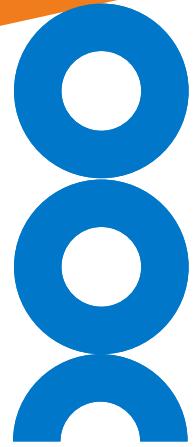
ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the nature and implication of African relational moral theory as captured in the Ubuntu concept for the humanitarian field, in general, and the humanitarian strand of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), in particular. Ubuntu is an important concept to explore for two reasons: first, as an important theoretical ethical model, it has the potential of expanding the understanding of humanitarian aid and solidarity for volunteers in the ESC programme, particularly from African perspectives, which many youth volunteers will encounter; second, it provides volunteers with important approaches to embedding inclusivity in humanitarian aid programmes while protecting the value and importance of differences and diversity, for ubuntu is built on the recognition of differences and the need to include differences and diversity into a web or network of relationships for the wellbeing and survival of communities. Ubuntu, therefore, stresses a co-dependency ethos, which holds that being human is to be in a web of relationship with others, and to provide support for them and this is at the heart of humanitarian aid. The paper, therefore, seeks to strengthen the ethical base of the humanitarian field, in general, and youth volunteering in ESC, in particular, through Ubuntu and the embedded understanding of humanness, solidarity, relationality, reciprocity and cooperation.
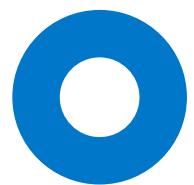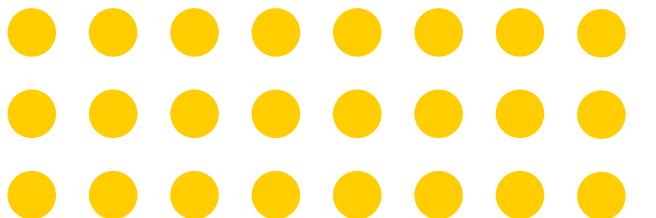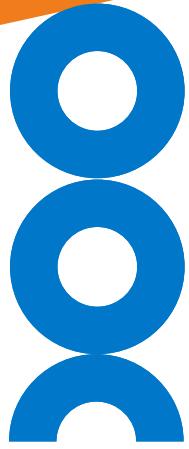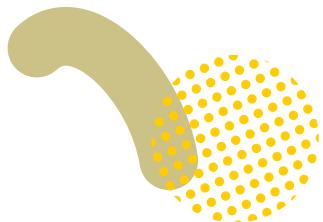
1. Introduction

Embedded in the concept of humanitarian assistance, in general, and youth volunteering for humanitarian aid in ESC, in particular, are three interrelated concepts: human, humanity and humaneness. The *Dictionary of Disaster Medicine and Humanitarian Relief* (Gunn 2013), therefore, defines the humanitarian concept as "the view that a person's and *humane* society's beliefs and actions should benefit [*human*]kind, its advancement and its benevolent values," and humanitarian action as "work and services undertaken for the advancement and the welfare of *humanity* without regard to race, religion, politics or profit." So it is vital that attention is always paid to these three interrelated concepts as they determine how humanitarian aid and assistance is defined, understood, theorised and practised. What does it mean to be human and humane? How does our understanding of such concepts feed into our understanding of humanity and our sense of duty thereto?

Autonomy, rationality and subjectivity feature strongly in conventional, largely Western conceptions of a human and a humane person, or of being human and humane (Mele 2001; Reath 2006). To be human is to be autonomous and rational in making choices, to be capable of agency, and making choices or using one's agency to promote the wellbeing of oneself and others. To be humane is to consciously deploy once autonomy

and agency into becoming not just human but virtuously human displaying such qualities as tenderness, kindness and compassion toward others, human and non-human. This general understanding of the self-projecting, autonomous, virtuous and rational human being emerges largely from Immanuel Kant's ethics of categorical imperative (Paton 2018) and has strongly influenced the Western understanding of humanity and humaneness in different spheres of life such as in bioethical, political, and humanitarian discourses. On the basis of such a subjectively defined virtue ethics of humaneness in which a subject rationally and solitarily deliberates and arrives at morally sound and permissible actions that can become universally applicable in the Kantian sense, such a humane and virtuous person is able, or at least, thought to be able, to take inclusion and solidarity seriously. A community of such subjective selves morally rational and virtuous ought to be able to always put the interest of others into focus in decision-making and, in particular, humanitarian assistance as an utmost good.

In this piece, I explore a quite different approach to the understanding of human, humaneness and humanity, an approach embedded in, and foundational to African philosophical thought, the Ubuntu approach. My intention is to explore Ubuntu as an African moral philosophy and its importance and value for the volunteering in humanitarian aid. Ubuntu is an important concept to explore for two
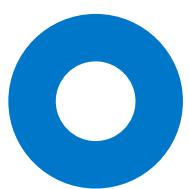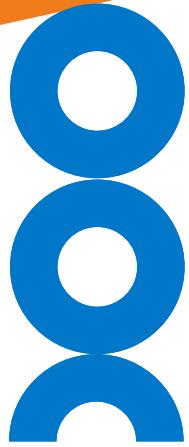
reasons: first, as an important theoretical ethical model, it has the potential of expanding the understanding of humanitarian aid and solidarity for volunteers in the ESC programme, particularly from African perspectives, which many youth volunteers will encounter; second, it provides volunteers with important approaches to embedding inclusivity in humanitarian aid programmes while protecting the value and importance of differences and diversity, for ubuntu is built on the recognition of differences and the need to include differences and diversity into a web or network of relationships for the wellbeing and survival of communities. In what follows, I begin by conceptualising Ubuntu, elaborating the sense in which I use it as an African moral philosophy. I then proceed to extrapolate and examine four principles deducible from Ubuntu that are vital for the humanitarian field particularly in embedding solidarity, inclusivity amidst diversity, and understanding in humanitarian projects: (i.) the humanist principle of interdependence; (ii.) the relational hermeneutic principle; (iii.) the ontological equilibrium principle and (iv.) inclusivity of difference principle. I conclude by highlighting the importance of paying attention to global theoretical models of humanness and humaneness for the humanitarian field.

2. Conceptualising Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African concept that defines African cultures or ways of life, its philosophical outlook in terms of what the world is, how it can be cognised and what actions are permissible – it stands at the centre of African identity (Imafidon 2021). As Richard Bolden aptly captures it, "The concept of Ubuntu is an alternative to individualistic and utilitarian philosophies that tend to dominate in the West. It is a Zulu/Xhosa word, with parallels in many other African languages, which is most directly translated into English as 'humanness'. Its sense, however, is perhaps best conveyed by the Nguni expression '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', which means 'a person is a person through other people'." (Bolden 2014). The idea that Ubuntu conveys – a person is a person through other persons – makes African political, moral, ontological and existential philosophy to be described as communitarian rather than individualistic. African communitarianism as embedded in the concept of Ubuntu is a discursive formation and relationality framework between the individual and the community that emphasises building communities, interdependence, solidarity, equilibrium, and communal harmony as great goods (Eze 2008). The South African Nobel Peace Laureate and anti-apartheid and human rights activists aptly captures this point in his book, No Future without Forgiveness, when he says that "Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the
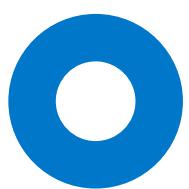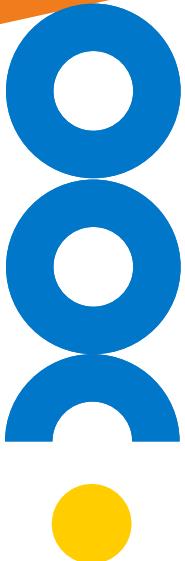
summum bonum – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good." (Tutu 1999).

The interwovenness, harmony and solidarity that is embedded in the concept of Ubuntu as humanness and in the idea it conveys that a person is a person only through other persons has both a broad and a narrow implication for humanity, although both implications are interconnected. Its broad implication consists in its emphasis on the inter-connectedness of all things all beings, everything existent - human and non-human. It stresses a co-dependency ethos, that all beings, human, environment, ancestors, energies, and so on, are all in an interlocked web of relationship such that there is no conceptual or interactive gap between the human self, the dead, the phenomenal world, spiritual or metaphysical entities. Every existing being or an entity needs one another to thrive and lead meaningful lives such that the quest for solidarity and harmony is essential for general wellbeing (Imafidon 2014; Ikuenobe 2006). When we think about how the actions of other affect us positively and negatively, how our own actions affect others, how the actions and inactions of the dead – our ancestors – affects and continues to affect us, and how our actions and inactions would affect the lives of all future existents, human and non-human, the idea of Ubuntu and its emphasis on togetherness really starts to sink in. Polycarp Ikuenobe (2006), therefore, states:

this idea of harmony or the goal of maintaining harmony for the human good and well-being is the foundation for communalism, which implies the need to impose social responsibilities on people in order to rationally perpetuate the relevant traditions and maintain harmony. So, maintaining harmony with the aid of the community is an essential human interest. The idea of pursuing and maintaining human welfare and interests is at the moral centre of communalism and the moral conception of personhood in African traditions. As such, communalism prescribes that people should act in a way that would enhance their own interest within the framework of pursuing the goal of human well-being and welfare in the context of natural harmony in their communities.
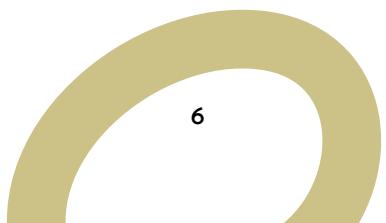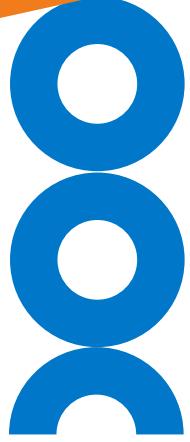
In contrast, the narrow implication of Ubuntu specifically concerns the emphasis on the interconnectedness of all human beings to the extent that no individual can exist or have a meaningful life in complete isolation from other individuals. It emphasises the importance of human solidarity and support for one another. It is in this level of the narrow implication of Ubuntu as implied in its very meaning as humanness that this piece will dwell more on by deducing important principles from it that can aid our understanding of the humanitarian field and improve our effectiveness therein.

3. Ubuntu and the humanitarian field: four principeles

The humanitarian field and humanitarian assistance are no doubt about building human relationships, improving lives, fostering solidarity and togetherness, pursuing equilibrium in humanity for instance, in terms of resource distribution, promoting fairness and justice, understanding differences, and enshrining a co-dependency ethos

into the very fabric of humanity. Achieving these is definitely at the heart of the core principles at the European Solidarity Corps as clearly seen in the personal pledge which consists of enhancing solidarity between people while respecting their cultures and traditions, and promoting a fair and equal society based on pluralism, justice, non-discrimination and solidarity (See the European Union Website). These goals of building and improving human lives and relationships, fostering togetherness and pursuing equilibrium are also at the very heart of youth volunteering and the solidarity project at the European Solidarity Corps. These principles, the youth volunteering, the solidarity project and other aspects of the European Solidarity Corps programme are, therefore, or at least, ought to be, more of a moral than a political duty or responsibility essentially for the reason that it is not about the control of power and resources and how they are distributed – although in some cases of humanitarian assistance, it becomes, or it is seen as, this by key actors, but about what is ultimately good for humans and for humanity. Thus, Ubuntu is a very crucial moral thought to examine. It enriches the very idea of volunteering for humanitarian purposes because it literally translates as 'humanness' and it emphasises the building of relationships, solidarity and togetherness. In this section, I examine four principles that are deducible from Ubuntu and what they contribute to building an effective humanitarian field.
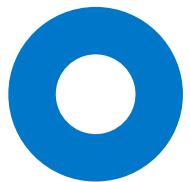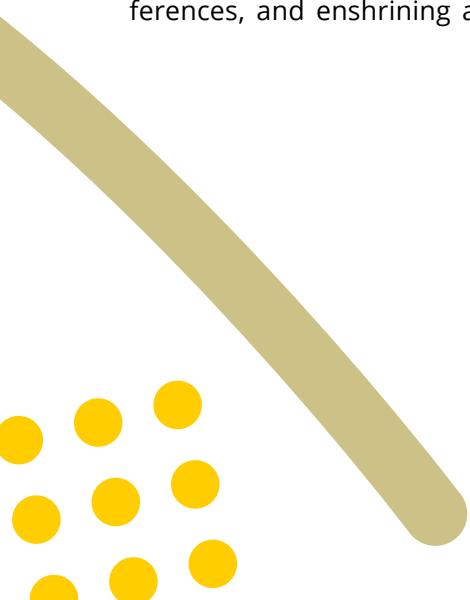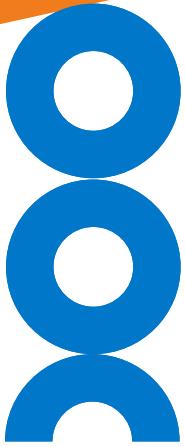
3.1 The humanist principle of interdependence

A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human.

– Desmund Tutu (2004)

Ubuntu, at least, in its narrow connotation, is no doubt a theory of the interdependence of human beings. The position of a person being a person through other persons emphasises the inevitability of depending on others in finding meaning and fulfilment. Augustine Shutte (2001) says that "Our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more deeply into community with others. So although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded."

What does this principle of interdependence mean for the volunteering for humanitarian aid in ESC and what does the recognition and acknowledgement of it mean as well? Humanitarian aid is often characterised by a giver of aid and a receiver of such. Such an exchange is often characterised as a parasitic relationship particularly by those critical of humanitarian aids. However, the many young people and actors involved in humanitarian assistance can acknowledge that it is more symbiotic, reciprocal and mutual than parasitic. In caring for another, it is well known in care ethics that equal reciprocity is a mirage. What we have in caring relationships is mutuality, a pattern of shared giving and receiving of good things, including intangibles such as respect (Andolsen 1993). Each party in a mutually benefiting care relationship, enjoy benefits they desire ranging from material goods to the feeling of self-fulfilment. In the humanitarian field, each actor is either able to receive some material resources or find meaning and self-fulfilment in just being able to give out the same resources, time and energy. The recognition of these mutual benefits encourages mutual respect, love and solidarity for all parties. Thus, self-fulfilment, self-actualisation and a meaningful living emerges not only from the recognition of one's autonomy and rationality, but even more importantly, from building meaningful relationships with others. It is,
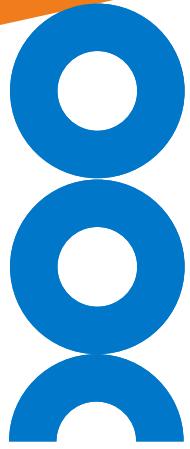
therefore, interesting that the European Solidarity Corps programme describes youth volunteering as providing "excellent opportunities to help where needed [and to] learn new skill." (See the European Union Website). So when a youth volunteers to be part of the rich programme of the European Solidarity Corps, opportunities and possibilities open up for this youth to help others and contribute meaningfully to the lives of others. More so, he or she is open to possibilities of learning not just new skills, but also learning to be more human by simply being in relationships with others.

3.2 The relational hermeneutic principle
'A person is a person through other persons' is also crucially hermeneutical or interpretative (Palmer 1969), breeding a vital theory or principle of interpretation and understanding of one another. My understanding of myself, the notion or idea of who I really am, my personality, cannot be completely disentangled from what others around me, others I relate to, think of me. This is the key point made by the Ubuntu hermeneutic: interpretation and understanding is relational, intersubjective and not merely subjective. This is crucial for the relationship that exists between the giver or volunteer and the receiver in humanitarian assistance. In humanitarian assistance, the assumption is that the receiver of aid simply receives and appreciates. Beyond this, the receiver in often silent voices interprets and understands. The receiver raises questions about motives, intentions and attitudes of the giver. Such questions produce a

hermeneutic perspective that the giver must take seriously in order to improve and do better. The refusal to pay attention by the giver to what the receiver understands of him or her and interpret his or her actions to be is often responsible for any form of crisis in the humanitarian filed. Similarly, the giver reads and interprets the response and attitudes of the receiver to aids received, formulating an understanding of the receiver. Such often leads to doing more or doing less in the future, re-strategizing, and forming or dissolving relationships. So, basically, consciously or sub-consciously, a receiver sees, understands, or can see and understand, himself or herself through the giver and a giver can see and understand himself or herself through the perspectives of the receiver. A humanitarian body as a collective self and individual actors or volunteers within can continue to improve by taking the perspectives of others seriously.

3.3 The ontological equilibrium principle
Human history is densely characterised by the oppression, marginalisation, discrimination, exploitation and exclusion of one by/from another, leading to disequilibrium in humanity. Disequilibrium results in inequalities, injustices and uneven distribution of wealth and resources. For example, the years of exploitation of African nations through slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism has deeply entrenched inequalities, impoverishment, and injustices into African societies. The concept of Ubuntu clearly shows that disequilibrium among beings, in general, and among
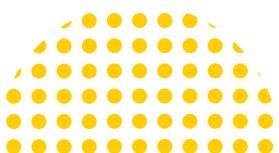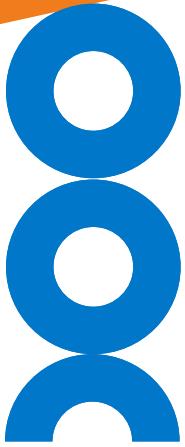
persons, in particular, leads to chaos to the extent that it leads to inhumanity. If a person is a person through other persons, the dislocation of persons, individual or collective, from other persons, produces non-persons or inhumanity by implication. Therefore, humanitarian assistance is a conscious and deliberate attempt to mend what has been dislocated, to foster equilibrium and to boost relationality. This understanding of humanitarian assistance is crucial. The often, common understanding of it that it is merely a 'good Samaritan' sort of activity produces more dislocation, disconnection and disequilibrium because the receiver is perceived as merely parasitic and bringing nothing to the table, while the giver receives all the praises for being philanthropic and generous. The disequilibrium and by implication, injustice in the attribution of value and worth to the giver and the receiver in humanitarian assistance is what the hermeneutic principle in Ubuntu nicely resolves as it shows that in any human relationship, both parties often find meaning and understanding in one another.

3.4 The inclusivity of difference principle

The assertion, 'a person is a person through other persons' encoded into the concept of Ubuntu is first and foremost the acknowledgement and recognition of differences, uniqueness and diversity, and then, the acknowledgement and recognition of the need to bring together these manifold differences to create an intensely rich and diverse

potpourri of social and human nourishment that every individual can benefit from. I am a person with my capabilities, weaknesses, likes, dislikes and so on that are similar, different or unique from yours. So I find meaning by depending on you where I lack and you on me where you lack. The African philosopher John Mbiti, may still be the best to have expressed this in these famous lines: "Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his or her own being, duties, privileges and responsibilities towards himself or herself and towards other people... The individual can only say: *'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.'* This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. (Mbiti 1969; emphasis are mine)." Hence, this communion of beings, in general, and of humans, in particular, is in no way a suppression of differences or the quest for sameness; it is rather an important approach to inclusivity that encourages all to bring their differences on board not the service of self, but of humanity. This is so essential for the humanitarian field, in general, and for volunteering, in particular. Whatever assistance is rendered by a volunteer to a community ought to be viewed as bringing one's difference at a given time to the service of others. The table can always turn tomorrow, but the spirit of the inclusivity of difference does not change.
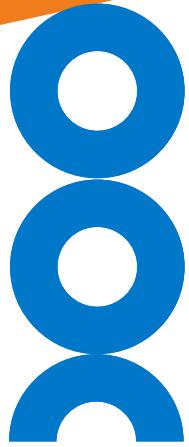
4. Concluding remarks

Ubuntu is no doubt an interesting and robust African communitarian concept that reiterates the need for cooperation, togetherness, solidarity, equilibrium and humanness. It speaks to our very nature as humans emphasising the basis of living a meaningful life through a co-dependency ethos that shows clearly that a person is a person through other persons and each one of us simply are, simply exist because others do – I am not only because I am autonomous and rational, but because we are. In the foregoing, we have seen how important the African philosophy of Ubuntu can be for the humanitarian field, in general, and the European Solidarity Corps, in particular, by exploring four principles embedded in it, namely the principles of interdependence, relational hermeneutics, ontological equilibrium and the inclusion of difference. These principles are at the heart of the European Solidarity Corps programme and impacts directly on fostering togetherness, solidarity and interdependence as expressed in its dictum: "the power of together." In particular, it enriches the understanding of youth volunteering in several ways. From the principle of interdependence, it is clear that volunteering results in mutual benefits, providing excellent opportunities for the volunteer not only to help with his or her skill and to learn new skills, but the opportunity to help improve the humanity of others while at the same time, learning to become more human. The principle of relational

hermeneutics show how European Solidarity Corps programme exposes volunteers to new and robust ways of interpreting and understanding the world and key issues such as climate change, equality, justice, inclusivity and culture from different vantage points and cross-border perspectives. The principle of ontological equilibrium emphasises the focus of the European Solidarity Corps on issues of justice, fairness, non-discrimination and equality, providing volunteers a perspective from which to think through issues of equality and the dislocation that comes from inequalities and imbalances in human societies. And the principle of the inclusion of difference provides a basis for volunteers to value difference and promote plurality and inclusion in any European Solidarity Corps project they are engaged in. Volunteers can be rightly motivated with these principles and be fully assured that what they do matter and is priceless in building a better world. Therefore, global perspectives on humanity, humanness, humaneness and meaningful existence such as from the Global South or the East and Middle East can form rich resources for discovering essential theoretical foundations for a fruitful humanitarian field that gives value, worth and respect to all human beings, regardless of who is at the giving or receiving end.
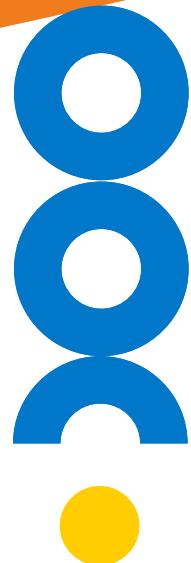
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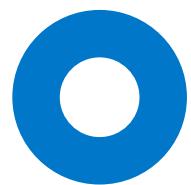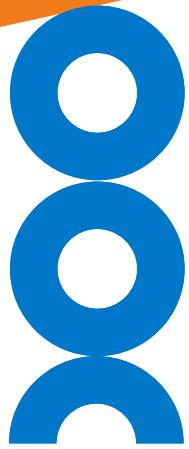
EDITORIAL INFO

SALTO European Solidarity Corps

SALTO ESC supports National Agencies and organisations in the youth field and beyond with the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps programme. The mission is to explore the potential of solidarity as a core value in European societies and to promote the use of the European Solidarity Corps as a tool for understanding and living solidarity. SALTO ESC coordinates networking activities, training, seminars and events that will support the quality implementation of the programme and maximise its impact. By doing this, SALTO ESC contributes to building a European Solidarity Corps community of organisations.

SALTO ESC is hosted by OeAD. The OeAD is the national agency for the implementation of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps in Austria. SALTO ESC is part of a European network of SALTO Resource Centres with the mission to improve the quality and impact of the EU youth programmes as well as to support and develop European youth work.

Find us online at www.salto-youth.net, www.oead.at and www.salto-youth.net/solidarity
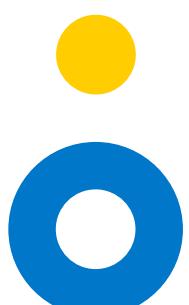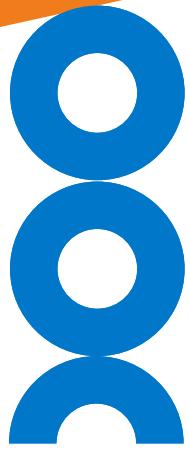
EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

This article is part of "Europe talks Solidarity" – a series of events and publications that offers a platform for the exploration of the concept of Solidarity, initiated by SALTO ESC. The discussion on Solidarity benefits from inputs from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. However, the opinions and views expressed in the articles in this series do not necessarily reflect those of SALTO ESC.

With this second round of articles, developed in 2021, SALTO ESC was looking for perspectives on Solidarity connected to the EU humanitarian aid field, as "Volunteering in humanitarian aid field" was integrated into 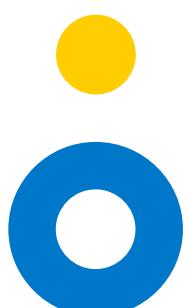the European Solidarity Corps programme in 2022.