REAL –

Resilience, Empowerment, Active Leadership

EU Level Policy Recommendations

Resilience
Empowerment
Active Leadership

Co-funded by
the European Union

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Across Europe, different communities can face multiple, overlapping common challenges that hinder their capacities for sustainable growth, social cohesion, and active engagement. It is often in these contexts that civil society organisations (CSOs), volunteers, and other community initiatives have the most impact, playing a crucial role in preparedness, crisis response and resilience building. Nonetheless, these groups also face systemic barriers such as limited financial resources, insufficient cooperation with government authorities and lack of training, which hinder their ability to create meaningful community engagement, thereby enhancing the resilience of European communities.

This document puts forward a set of EU level, evidence-based policy recommendations as part of the Erasmus+ REAL Project. REAL – Resilience, Empowerment and Active Leadership – aims to support local communities across Europe to become more resilient, better able to adapt, respond, and recover from ongoing and future crises such as climate change, inequality, and economic stress. This will be achieved through the empowerment of community leaders, CSO representatives, volunteer managers, and decision-makers across six European countries (Ireland, Croatia, Romania, Germany, Norway, and Belgium) with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to promote sustainable growth, social cohesion, and active engagement and, in turn, strengthen the resilience of these communities.

The REAL Policy Recommendations are evidence-based EU-level recommendations that build on the work developed by the REAL project partners since the inception of the project, including the Comparative Research Report on Community Resilience, and the Best Practices Manual: Resilience Across Borders. These documents highlighted the common challenges and shared priorities encountered in the partner countries in the context of community engagement and resilience. The common challenges are:

1. Limited financial resources for CSOs and volunteer organisations
2. Inadequate formal cooperation between government institutions and NGOs
3. Insufficient inclusion of volunteers in formal crisis planning processes
4. Lack of systematic crisis management training for volunteers and organisations
5. Low community engagement and awareness regarding preparedness

6. Digital infrastructure gaps affecting communication and coordination
7. Social inequalities that limit the resilience capacity of vulnerable groups.

And the shared priorities:

1. Community engagement as the top priority across all countries (51–80% of surveyed organisations)
2. Capacity building and training for volunteers and CSOs
3. Collaboration with authorities for effective crisis response
4. Emergency preparedness and response capabilities
5. Environmental resilience initiatives
6. Mental health and social support for communities

The REAL EU level policy recommendations apply the E4 lens – Ecological, Energy, Economic and Equity – to capture the interconnected nature of the crises facing Europe today.

- **Ecological crises** such as climate change, environmental degradation, and natural disasters are accelerating, threatening communities and ecosystems across borders.
- **Energy crises**, including energy security, digital transformation, and technological transition, have underscored Europe's dependence on external actors and the urgent need for both sustainable energy transitions and democratic digital infrastructures.
- **Economic crises** manifest in financial instability, lack of sustainable funding for civil society, and uneven resource allocation, all of which weaken the resilience of organisations and communities.
- **Equity crises** highlight challenges to democratic participation, human rights, and social inclusion, particularly affecting marginalised and vulnerable groups.

The E4 lens offers a holistic view of the challenges faced by communities in Europe, making clear the complexity of these crises that can no longer be considered in isolation from one another. The E4 approach emphasises systemic resilience — strengthening ecological sustainability, energy security, financial and organisational stability, and social equity as mutually reinforcing pillars of Europe's crisis response capacity.

2. EU–level Policy Recommendations

A. Financial & Organisational Resilience

Financial and Organisational Resilience

Ensure stable, structural funding for civil society to enable organised participation, including through operating grants and structured partnership agreements with EU institutions, national governments, and other local authorities. Allow for joint funding mechanisms for collaborative projects.

Ensure a systematic Volunteer Support Framework

Develop comprehensive funding and support systems for volunteer management, training, and coordination, ensuring volunteers are prepared and protected before, during, and after crises.

Strengthen solidarity and maintain the unique value of the European Solidarity Corps under Erasmus+

Make volunteering a cross–cutting priority by advocating for Solidarity to become a horizontal priority for Erasmus+ as a way of safeguarding ESC and expanding volunteering and solidarity across the programme, including as a central aspect of the focus on population preparedness included as part of the programme.

B. Inclusive and Democratic Resilience

Implement Inclusive Preparedness Planning

Integrate anti-discrimination principles into crisis preparedness strategies, ensuring the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups are fully addressed.

Strengthen Migration Rights and CSO Support

Adopt a rights–based migration approach, coupled with strong civil society support mechanisms, and end the criminalisation of organisations and people providing humanitarian assistance.

Ensure Multilingual and Accessible Communication

Design all early warning messages and preparedness materials to be inclusive using multiple languages, accessible formats, and diverse communication channels to reach all members of the community, including those with disabilities or limited literacy.

C. Operational & Cross-Cutting Mechanisms for Community Resilience

Establish an Inter-Institutional Civil Dialogue Framework

Implement a structured dialogue mechanism, as foreseen in Article 11 TEU, to ensure CSOs are meaningfully involved in agenda-setting, policy orientation, and co-creation processes.

Establish Local Early Warning Networks

Develop and maintain localised early warning systems staffed by trained community volunteers who can provide timely alerts and coordinate immediate response efforts, in order to avoid oversupply of volunteers and lack of coordination.

Standardise Volunteer Mobilisation Protocols

Create clear, standardised procedures for the activation, coordination, and support of volunteers during emergencies, resorting to cross-sectoral mobilisation, ensuring efficiency and safety in response operations that have the capacity to prioritise previously identified vulnerable people.

Develop Competency-Based Training Curricula

Establish standardised training programs that define the essential skills, knowledge, and behaviours required for effective volunteer management, aligned with European competency frameworks.

D. Environmental & Energy Resilience

Strengthen Environmental Civil Society Protection

Guarantee fundamental rights for environmental defenders, protesters, and climate activists across the EU through legal protections and monitoring mechanisms.

Mainstream Community-Led Climate Resilience

Provide structured financial and technical support for local, community-led sustainability initiatives, building on the EU LIFE funding programme and its successors.

Develop Community Energy Initiatives

Support not-for-profit and community-based renewable energy projects under the REPowerEU framework to reduce dependence on foreign energy sources and foster energy democracy.

Co-Design the European Digital Space

Develop inclusive digital resilience by establishing a participatory process where citizens and CSOs co-create a democratic, rights-based digital ecosystem aligned with European values.

3. Conclusion

Building community resilience across Europe requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that recognises the interdependence of the four pillars of the E4 Framework (ecological, energy, economic, and equity dimensions). The analysis that the REAL Project conducted identified common challenges across Europe that demonstrate that these crises do not occur in isolation and must therefore be considered in an interconnected manner to strengthen resilience.

The **REAL Policy Recommendations** call for systemic change that places **civil society organisations, volunteers, and communities** at the heart of Europe's resilience agenda. Sustainable funding, structured cooperation with authorities, inclusive preparedness, and the protection of civic space are essential to ensuring that communities are active agents of change.

The implementation of these policy recommendations requires a cross-sectoral commitment and collaboration at all governance levels to ensure that an enabling environment is created, where civil society and volunteering can thrive.

The recommendations laid out in this document must be understood in the wider context of different EU policies and programmes, such as the European Green Deal, REPowerEU, and the EU Civil Society Strategy.

The REAL project demonstrates that by empowering communities, investing in people, and institutionalising cooperation, Europe can move from reactive crisis management to proactive, inclusive, and sustainable resilience. Resilience must be built from the ground up, rooted in solidarity, participation, and shared responsibility. By empowering civil society, supporting volunteers, and institutionalising inclusive cooperation between governments, NGOs, and communities, Europe can build a more resilient, sustainable, and democratic future.