EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

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A new framework for online solidarity

SOLIDARITY · INCLUSION · EMPATHY ·
ONLINE FACILITATION · YOUTH WORK

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Rob van Leeuwen is a Dutch and European citizen, facilitator and trainer. Since 2004 he has been involved in the field of International Voluntary Service: from participant to project manager, board member to trainer. He also worked for the Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore, facilitating exchanges for young people from the two continents the foundation covers, and co-edited several publications there. He is a passionate promoter of non-formal education and cross-cultural learning for young people. Recently, he followed the online course on organising Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Projects as many of his facilitations have gone virtual. Next to his part-time freelancing in the youth field, Rob coordinates student exchange partnerships with universities from all around the world.

ABSTRACT

The consequences of the pandemic have drastically changed the landscape of supporting solidarity through international youth work: many of the activities have taken an online turn. In this article, we present the findings of a survey of youth workers on their experiences of offering activities online throughout the Spring of 2020. It provides an overview of best practices to be used to foster solidarity through empathy and inclusion in the online environment. Lastly, we call upon youth workers, practitioners, policy-makers, young people and resource centres, to work on producing accessible resources, hands-on toolkits, free online tools, platforms and training opportunities in order to structurally embed online solidarity in the future.

1. A new framework for online solidarity

1.1 Introduction

In the State of the Union address of September 2016, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced the development of a European Solidarity Corps (Civico 2017). Following the success story of the European Voluntary Service, the new European-funded programme offers young people the opportunity to volunteer, work, train and run their own solidarity projects and contribute towards communities across Europe (European Youth Portal 2019).

After Jean-Claude Juncker had announced that "Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together" (European Commission 2016), the debate was opened for what solidarity in a European context actually encompasses. Unquestionably, exploring the interpretation and rationale for solidarity in the field of youth work was especially relevant for those working with the European Solidarity Corps. As such, when the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre was established in November 2018. One of its first responsibilities was to carry out a research project to explore the common narrative for the concept of solidarity.

The results of the research project, "4Thought for Solidarity Report" (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020), clearly shows that the need for solidarity in Europe was supported by practitioners, researchers, policy-makers and young people from across the continent. While these findings indicated common ground to build on, the surveys, interviews and consultations showed mixed results for a common definition or understanding of solidarity.

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Personal experiences, cultural backgrounds and diverse values led to different views and expectations about solidarity and its rationale, resulting in the conclusion that there is no specific definition of solidarity to be found.

While this may sound discouraging for the field of solidarity in Europe, the "4Thought for Solidarity Report" approached the subject on a very positive note. Building upon the wide range of contributions, the authors explored common ground between young people, practitioners, policy-makers and researchers by constructing a new model of solidarity. In the model, solidarity is characterised by four cornerstones, namely; 'Empathy', 'Human Rights', 'Active Citizenship' and 'Inclusion'. Underlying ideas for these cornerstones are, 'active participation', 'equality of opportunity', 'strengthening communities', 'social justice', 'volunteering' and 'responsibility'.

In this paper, we will further explore the relevant cornerstones and supporting ideas for those international youth workers who aim for solidarity in the online space, specifically focusing on the challenges and opportunities that come with it.

1.2 Drastic changes for international youth work

In the Spring 2020, the landscape of international youth work drastically changed. Government-imposed lockdowns, mandatory quarantines, worldwide travel restrictions and social distancing measures, abruptly altered the way activities and training events for young people could be delivered. International youth events were called off or postponed to an unknown future date. As such, youth work all across the globe suddenly felt the widespread consequences of the pandemic.

Nonetheless, amidst the hardship and challenges, we have seen an outpouring of creativity and solidarity sweep through the world. During these months whole communities from different places across the globe were showing their support for one another. This included singing from their balconies and clapping for health care workers. At the same time, youth organisations moved their activities to the online space.

Many youth workers have shown that the field of international youth work can be incredibly adaptive to challenging situations in remarkably creative ways. Virtual activities were abruptly organised in order to continue to reach out to volunteers and active members. The amount of youth activities offered online was unprecedented, unexpected and by far unanticipated. Even the preparatory meeting of "Europe Talks Solidarity" took place online (see Photo 1).

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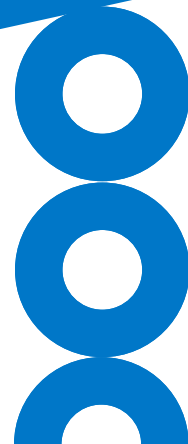**Rob van Leeuwen**
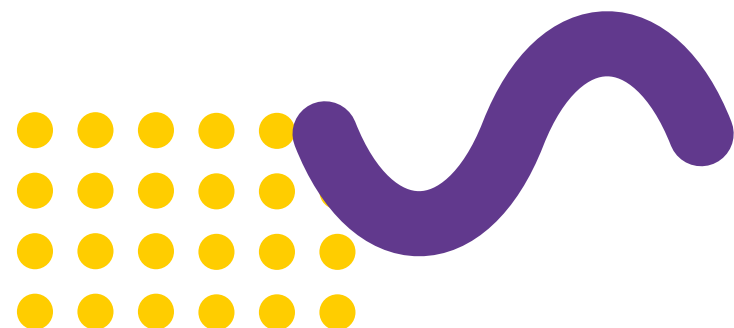
Photo 1.
Authors of Europe Talks Solidarity meet online
to prepare for their contributions

The abrupt changes in international youth work, may be able to contribute towards the education and training of youth workers in developing competences to effectively commit to solidarity in the online space.

Through the means of a survey on online facilitation of youth work in times of COVID-19, we have collected some recommendations and ideas on how to most effectively facilitate an online dialogue. These recommendations may prove to be useful for those engaging in online activities within the European Solidarity Corps, as well as other youth organisations.
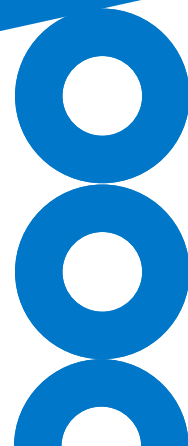
2. Method

2.1 Survey
Between the 24th of June and the 5th of August 2020, we collected survey responses from fellow youth workers on their experiences with online facilitation.

In the survey, we covered eight questions on online facilitation, which were a mixture of multiple-choice options and open-ended questions. Participants were asked to provide details on how many sessions they had delivered online since March 2020 and how they would rate their experiences with online activities, both as a participant and as facilitator. We explored the challenges they faced in facilitating an online session and whether they felt that facilitation skills / tools / methods needed in the online space were different from the offline space. We provided participants with the opportunity to indicate which skills / tools / methods they felt were necessary for successfully offering online activities as a youth worker and whether they could provide us with any good practices they had experienced.
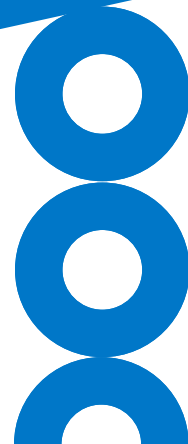
2.2 Respondents
A total of 59 respondents from 23 different countries shared their experiences of facilitating activities online. Table 1 shows the wide variety in the respondents' amount of experience in facilitating sessions online.

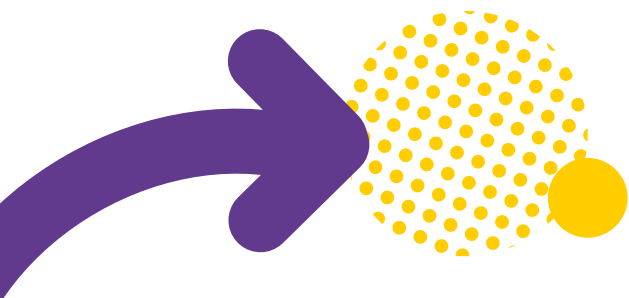| Number of activities	Percentage of respondents
Less than 3	27.1%
3-5	23.7%
6-10	22%
11-15	6.8%
More than 15	18.6%

Table 1. Overview of experience of the respondents
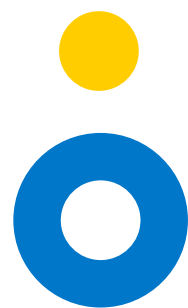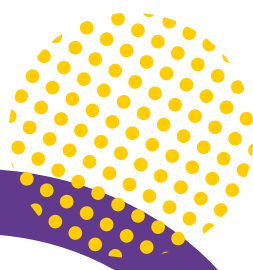
3. Survey findings

From the survey, we have identified four main findings.

3.1 Youth workers did not hate their online activities

On average, the survey respondents self-rated their experience with online facilitation as 7.4 out of 10. The range was from how much they hated (1) or loved it (10). These findings indicated that youth workers did not consider it such a terrible thing to have their sessions in the online space. The results of our survey also indicated that facilitating a higher number of sessions online did not necessarily lead to a higher-rated experience, see Table 2.

Number of activities	Average rate of satisfaction
Less than 3	7.0
3-5	7.3
6-10	7.1
11-15	8.8
More than 15	7.7

Table 2. Overview of satisfaction of the respondents

3.2 The challenges in online facilitation are diverse

All the respondents - except one - indicated to have experienced challenges in facilitating a group online. These findings strongly underlined that the challenges in online facilitation are present. Moreover, the findings displayed in Table 3 show that there was a strong diversity in the challenges that were encountered.

Challenge	Percentage of respondents agreed
Technical difficulties during the online activity	58.8%
Inactive participation	41.2%
Insufficient number of participants	39.2%
Difficulties to find the correct methods to facilitate activities	31.4%
Limitations to the online platform	29.4%
Difficulties to use non-formal education in activities	29.4%
Not being able to keep the participants' attention span	27.5%
No suitable online platform	19.6%
Chaotic interaction between young participants	17.6%

Table 3. The frequency of challenges experienced by the respondents

3.3 Online facilitation requires different skills, tools and methods

In the survey, we asked our respondents whether they felt that online facilitation requires a different set of skills, tools and methods than offline facilitation. The respondents indicated a clear difference between these two worlds, which are presented in Table 4 below.
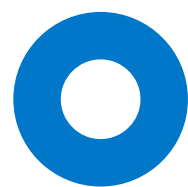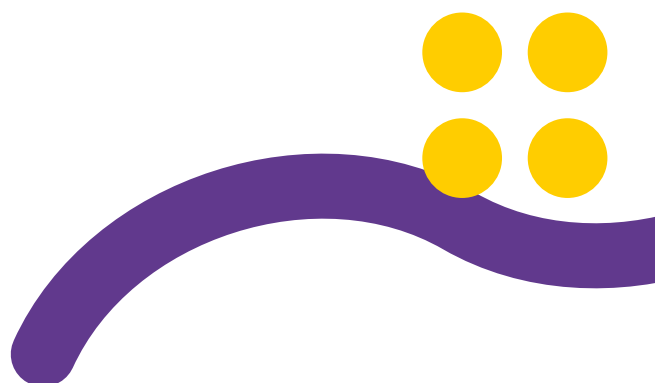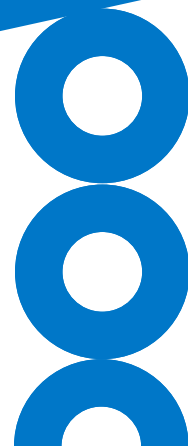
|	**Percentage of respondents**
Skills, tools and methods for online facilitation partially differ	61.7%
Online facilitation asks for totally different facilitation skills, tools and methods	18.3%
Facilitation skills are the same, while tools and methods are different	10%
No differences between online and offline facilitation skills, tools and methods	6.7%
Facilitation skills are different, while tools and methods are the same	3.3%

Table 4. Does a facilitator need different skills, tools and methods for online facilitation compared to offline?

3.4 The richness of online facilitation experiences

When we first distributed our survey, we were unsure how much experience youth workers would have had in facilitating in the online space. In the open-ended questions regarding what kind of skills, tools and methods are necessary for online facilitation, we received a wide variety of answers. From the responses, it quickly became apparent that there was a lot of experience and best practice already out there. As such, our survey found that there was a richness in the recommendations for online facilitation of solidarity by youth workers. They showed so much creativity, flexibility and readiness to adjust to the abrupt changes. Many took on a learning by doing approach or engaged in training activities to increase their skills and knowledge.
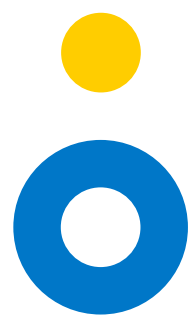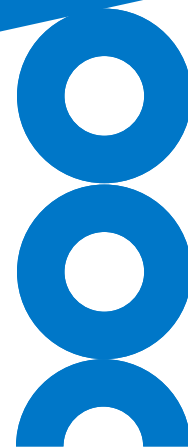
4. Best practice sharing

From the survey respondents' experiences, it is possible to compile a list of recommendations and suggestions for online facilitation of youth work. These recommendations have been clustered into four categories as relevant to facilitation: purpose, space, people and process.

4.1 Purpose

The 4Thought for Solidarity Report has shown that there is no single definition or understanding of solidarity that is mutually agreed upon among youth workers, young people, practitioners and policy-makers (Bačlija Knoch and Nicodemi 2019). Bačlija Knoch and Nicodemi justly express that there remains a clear need for dialogue in order to further explore the needs and backgrounds of the different groups and how they relate to solidarity.

As such, in deciding upon the purpose of facilitation, there is a wide range of opportunities to actually build upon the New Model for Solidarity. Firstly, it opens up the possibility to explore the differences and similarities in what participants have come to understand about what solidarity is. Moreover, the purpose of your activity can also be to further explore the four cornerstones of solidarity, namely human rights, empathy, active citizenship and inclusion.

An example of this can be found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the PRONI Centre for Youth Development suddenly moved their activities to the online space (Youth Express Network 2020). Their purpose of promoting peace and activism among active young citizens remained the same, but the way that their activities were addressed changed. Through online sessions, they kept in touch with their young people and engaged in dialogue on contemporary issues such as climate change and media literacy - building upon exploring differences and similarities through dialogue.

4.2 Space

The biggest opportunity for international youth work in the virtual space is the ability to reach out to a large number of people. Logging into an online session is much more accessible than spending time and money on travelling to an on-site activity. There are also more opportunities to include young people from a wide(r) range of backgrounds.

However, online spaces come with very different limitations than the offline spaces. The most commonly-listed issue of 'technical difficulties' is problematic for both facilitators and participants in a wide range of settings. For example, it may be difficult for all voices to be heard (literally and figuratively). It can also be difficult to provide technical support and facilitate a session at the same time. Moreover, there may be hiccups with the online platform which can lead to the failure of a tool or method. While each dilemma needs to be considered separately, respondents listed several best practices.
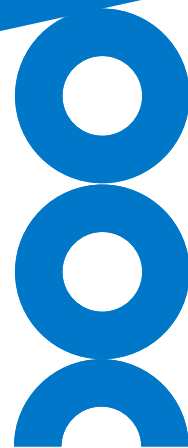
4.2.1 Take time to explore your online space

If you are working with a new platform, chances are that you will need ample time to actually get used to the new environment. Youth workers may want to carefully look at their programme and consider what they need in the online space. Taking the time to explore the online space provides the opportunity to consider how to make it an inclusive and open space for participants to engage in.

For example, many platforms provide the possibility to let participants talk to each other in smaller groups (break-out rooms). For participants who are hesitant to speak up in a larger group session, this may be the place where they feel more free to share. Moreover, many platforms allow for the possibility to collect ideas and opinions anonymously and interactively, which may help participants to feel safe about sharing their thoughts and to also stay engaged.

Lastly, to foster inclusion, it is recommended to work with platforms that are mobile phone compatible. This way, participants with less access to computers and laptops are able to engage as well.

4.2.2 Take time to let your participants explore the online space

Our survey showed that introducing a new platform can be hard, especially if you are working with youth groups with fewer opportunities. Platforms may not work properly on older software and many of the social media platforms that participants are already used to may not be suitable for interactive sessions. It can help to take a lot of time to explain the functionalities of the online space and to slowly build up the tools you are using - it can also help if you can provide any connections to what participants were used to in the offline space. If anything, getting used to a new environment takes patience.

Utilising spaces that young people are already used to, such as Discord or Instagram, will also support the young people's acceptance and understanding of the new spaces. We recommend that youth workers look into a list of online platforms which are used by young people in a website produced by Digital Youth Work (Digital Youth Work 2020).

4.2.3 If possible, host a session with someone appointed to tech support

It may be helpful for facilitators to host a session they are doing with a colleague. This way, the main facilitator of the session can focus on the content and process, while the other person is appointed for tech support. This way, you can make the technical issues you may run into less disrupting and also make it more low-key for participants to reach out to the tech support.
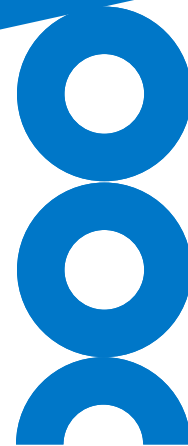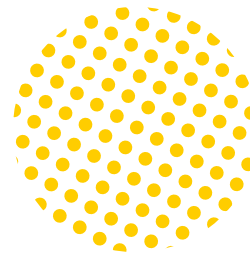
4.2.4 If possible, invest in platforms with a reliable service

We acknowledge that financial resources are often limited. However, if the resources are there, youth organisations can support their online-hosted groups by financially investing in platforms that are providing a reliable service and allow their facilitators to interactively engage with participants.

4.2.5 Recognise the two spaces

When participating in an online activity, you are still sitting on that chair in the offline space. The two spaces are interconnected. When you are fully immersed in what is happening online, you may not notice what is happening around you offline. However, the same holds true the other way around. Recognise that your participants are always in both spaces at the same time, which may sometimes make it difficult for them to focus on the online session.

4.3 People

To have a proper exchange between you and your participants and to also have that between them in an online session, it is important to let them connect to each other. Give special attention and awareness to each of your participants as you cannot see and hear them as you would if you were all in the same physical room together. The online space provides limitations and challenges for which the following solutions are suggested.

4.3.1 Non-verbal communication

One of the challenges to enhance mutual understanding on an online platform that was mentioned by several respondents is the lack of the non-verbal input. Sometimes, the faces of participants may be little more than a postage stamp on a computer screen, this makes it incredibly daunting to recognise group dynamics or strong emotions. As such, a few of our respondents suggested making as much from all the non-verbal information you can possibly get by setting the guidelines for the online setting. It can help to inform your group beforehand that you will be working with microphones and webcams. Ask participants to turn their cameras on, given that it provides so much more non-verbal communication than only sound. Please note there may be issues of confidence and safety that will mean it is appropriate for some participants to have their cameras turned off.

4.3.2 Screen fatigue and energy levels

During the pandemic, many young people have seen their school work and other activities move to the online space. A lot of time for young people nowadays is spent behind a computer screen, which can be extremely tiring. Nonetheless, a lot of the respondents indicated that there is a wide range of activities, games and quizzes to energise an online group. In building your activities, you may also want to consider making your online sessions shorter or including sufficient breaks and energisers to maintain energy levels.

4.3.3 Online inclusion and feedback

During online sessions, it is important to allow all the participants to contribute to the discussion. A facilitator can actively invite a young person that is silent to share a perspective on the topic at stake or invite everyone to share their thoughts through an online chat function or through polling questions. At the same time, other participants may be overly present during an online session as they feel more comfortable to talk online, it is important to tackle over-representation as well. It is also important to ask participants' for their feedback on their experience in the online exchange: Could they share their own opinion and ideas sufficiently?

Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that inclusion is also embedded in the access to reliable technology or a personal space. Young people may not always have access to a laptop or computer, a reliable internet connection, or a personal space to engage in the activities. A suggestion made by youth workers is to conduct a small anonymous survey before the start of your activities to find out what would work for participants: What platforms would work for them? Do they have a space to freely express their opinions?

While it is not always possible to accommodate all participants' needs, it may provide an insight into any accessibility issues, shortcomings and challenges the young people face and provide you an opportunity to find potential solutions.

4.3.4 Participants' commitment

Several youth workers have indicated through the survey that they see lower commitment of their youth members to join online activities. It is easier to cancel or not show up. It is therefore recommended by some of the respondents to remind the participants about the online activity even more than you would for the equivalent offline activities. It is also recommended to follow up with those that were unable to attend the session.

4.3.5 Informal sharing

In on-site activities, there is the space for the formal activity organised by the facilitator and there is a space for informal time between the participants where they talk with each other. These spaces are very meaningful for young people. Allow the participants to stay longer online after an activity to catch up with their friends and discuss other things. In longer activities, provide space and time for informal chats in between the different sessions.

4.4 Process

For a facilitator, the process is the journey to reach the goal of a session. Without a correct map to support the participants in the process, you may not reach solidarity and empathy among your participants. The online environment provides various limitations and opportunities in the methods and skills that can be used. The survey respondents provided the following insights.
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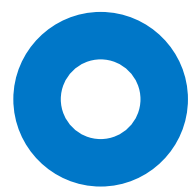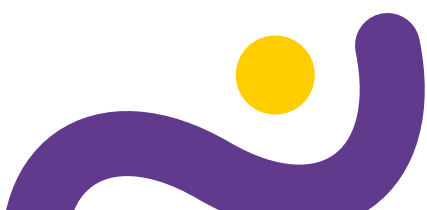
4.4.1 It is time for a new facilitator's toolbox

The respondents indicated that they found it difficult to come up with games, energisers and other tools for interaction and working methods to use with online groups. Others indicated that they had started working on new toolboxes to compile new tools and methods for exploring in the online space and that they had found a wide variety of options. As such, we feel that it is important to create resources in which we offer working methods for the online space.

There is a need for youth workers and resource centres to collaborate on creating these new toolboxes. They need to include a wide variety of activities. In building any new toolbox, we actively encourage youth workers to take inspiration from the tools that are already offered (SALTO-Youth 2020) and to provide feedback on how they have developed the activities for the online space.

4.4.2 Facilitators' skills 2.0

The survey results showed that the facilitator requires additional attention to skills required specifically for online facilitation. These vary from technical skills, including the flexibility and adaptability that are required for using different online platforms. As for many facilitators, this process is a process of 'learning by doing', improvisation and problem solving. All these skills will be fully tested during online facilitation, as more things are new to the facilitator.

Observation skills are updated as you need to pay different attention to your participant's well-being and participation (see also the sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 above). In a team of facilitators, having distinct and separate roles is important, e.g. by having someone to focus on technical support the teamwork will go differently. To respond to the more sit-back-and-relax approach for some young people during an online activity compared to an offline one, facilitators need to become more proactive and increase their leadership skills to increase participation and engagement.

4.4.3 Combine synchronous and asynchronous activities

In online activities, we often tend to focus on synchronous sessions where all participants are present at the same time. Online activities can be synchronous but they also allow for people to share asynchronously - meaning not simultaneously or concurrent in time. For example, participants can be invited to share their opinions or a video whenever they want. This way, all participants are able to contribute at a time that is most suitable for them. Furthermore, the synchronous online meet-ups can be additionally supported by homework tasks in between. For the asynchronous activities, the organisers can use an online platform where these activities will take place or create an online folder where the tasks are being introduced and answered.
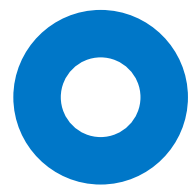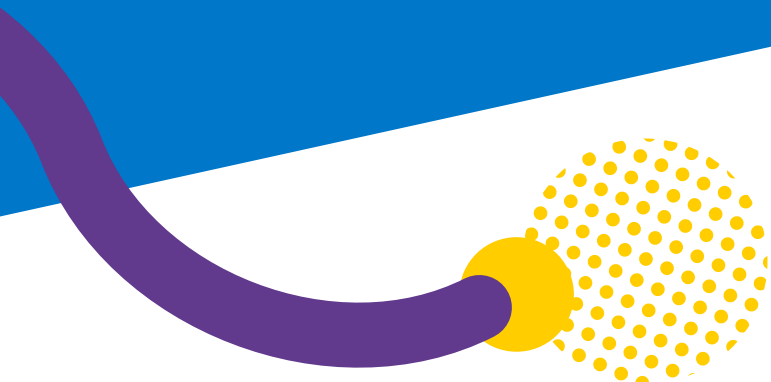
5. Overall conclusion and discussion

In conclusion, our survey results indicate that most facilitators actually enjoyed their online facilitation experiences, which we found very comforting to learn. It turns out that the observed challenges in online facilitation are diverse and that most respondents feel that online facilitation requires different skills, tools and/or methods. Nonetheless, we also found that there was already a wide range of experiences and best practices among our respondents.

In the best practice sharing, we have explored possibilities for youth workers to make the best of their time with participants in the online space. We have seen that the purpose of facilitation can guide facilitators in the choices they make for the design of the activities. We have touched upon how to consider important aspects such as fostering inclusion and empathy in groups.

For the time being, the uncertain future of international travel and physical interaction will undoubtedly continue to provide an urgency for youth workers to invest in online facilitation. These unanticipated changes have already given momentum for facilitators to build a toolbox for their online interactions. We argue that these experiences and best practices will not only stay for the current time of the pandemic, but will offer the basis for structural opportunities to continue to encourage international young people to foster solidarity.

This basis for structural opportunities also fits the direction of the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme, in which virtual exchanges have been put on the agenda. It needs to be highlighted that the planned virtual exchanges will not be replacing on-site activities but rather complement them (European Parliament - Committee on Culture and Education 2020). However, it needs to be acknowledged that online activities are only able to provide real added value to physical ones if they are implemented effectively. Youth workers will need the relevant resources, skills, tools and methods to be able to organise online activities and to be able to promote solidarity in the online space.

As such, we are calling upon youth workers, practitioners, policy-makers, young people and resource centres to work on accessible resources, hands-on toolkits and free online tools and platforms. Youth workers should be able to increase their skills, knowledge and attitudes towards online facilitation, which can only be fostered by sufficient training opportunities.

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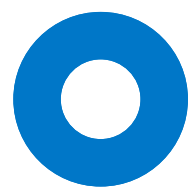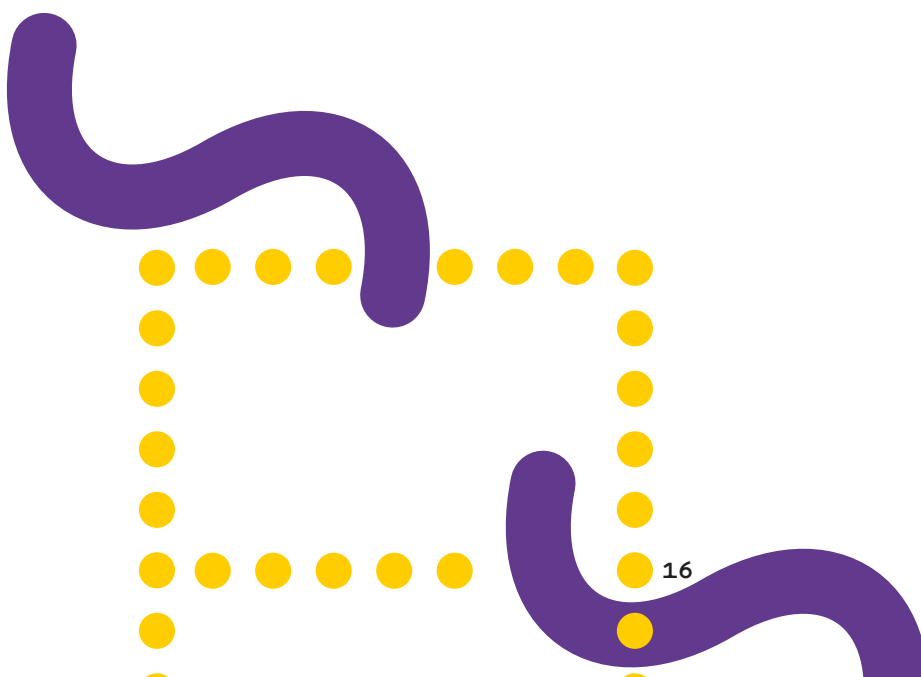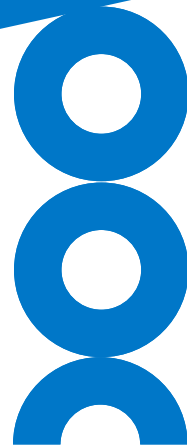
EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

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 the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre (www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity). 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 the Resource Centre.

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