Organising cross-regional youth exchanges

Africa-Europe youth exchange programme
Why cross-regional youth exchanges?

We want to strengthen our global movement against the root causes of social and environmental injustice and for system change! We know that our local struggles are connected to those of communities across the world and that we are more powerful when we work together.

Within this project, African and European groups formed partnerships based on synergies between environmental and social justice struggles, such as resistance to oil, coal and deforestation. In several instances corporations based in Europe were contributing to environmental and social injustices in Africa. Young people were able to explore the global linkages between our countries and struggles and discuss together how to challenge them - leading to mutual support and more effective solidarity.

We value experiential learning. Through spending time with our partner group, we had rich learning experiences about campaigns, working with local communities, methods of youth engagement and the challenges facing different organisations.

We want to build friendships and solidarity across borders! Building meaningful relationships between groups in the federation strengthens our commitment to our campaigns and each other, gives campaigns a face, makes the work more enjoyable, helps us to build intercultural understanding and skills, which are essential for enabling us to work together as a global movement.

We are great multipliers. Personal stories and hearing directly from a peer are more likely to engage young people in issues like climate change. Meeting and sharing ideas with other youth working on similar issues in different countries is an effective way to strengthen local youth groups.
Organising youth exchanges: Case studies

Croatia -> Mozambique

Mozambique and Croatia share coal as a common resistance target, although in Croatia it is imported to burn in power stations and Mozambique has a lot of coal mining. They also share a common approach to their work, prioritising cooperation with other social justice movements. Dora from Zelena Akcija/ FoE Croatia stayed with Justiça Ambiental (FoE Mozambique) for a month, the longest of the exchanges in this project. She helped plan and run sessions at JAI’s five day youth seminar on environmental justice.

“It was a very interesting and intense week, and although I feel quite tired I have this insatiable urge to learn as much as possible about Mozambique, it’s past and current affairs and the issues it faces today: land grabbing, REDD, large scale mining and dams. ”

Dora also travelled to the province of Tete, a region with a lot of coal extraction, where she met with 4 local communities and shared experiences of coal resistance in Croatia. Together with communities, they established the global link with communities across the world and showed examples of where resisting communities have won.

“The best moments were definitely the last part of the youth seminar and the gathering in Tete, seeing that both the students and the communities expressed their opinions with so much passion and collectively decided to take action. And knowing that they will succeed, sooner or later... I finally understood on a deeper the need for solidarity in activism and in life. I knew it before, I was promoting it, but this was the first time that I actually felt it. It kind of sprung naturally - we are all in this together, we ultimately all want the same things and although our fights are our own, we have to support each other”

Dora tried to learn Portuguese before her trip and delivered her presentations in Portuguese, which was a challenge but a worthwhile one.

“If I hadn’t “learned“ the language, the experience in Tete would not have been so impacting, because I would not have been able to communicate with the people and actually understand the depths of their frustrations and desires, which was the most important part of it all.”

Hear Dora speak about her experience in Uganda on Real World Radio: http://realworldradio.fm/9893-exchange-between-friends-of-the?lang=es
Uganda -> Norway

Precious from NAPE, the National Association of Professional Environmentalists / FoE Uganda spent 10 days with Natur Og Undom / YFoE Norway, sharing skills and knowledge with staff and volunteers. Both groups work on oil extraction and how it impacts communities locally and globally.

"I took part in a peaceful demonstration in Oslo, led by YFoE Norway, about oil extraction in Nigeria. It was in solidarity with youth in the Niger Delta. I also took part in a two-day seminar with students from across Europe about YFoE Norway’s climate lawsuit against their government for opening new oil drilling in the Arctic Sea."

Precious visited schools and helped recruit new volunteers, getting a taste of how YFoE Norway have built a network of over 7000 young volunteers. She also gave a presentation about youth work in Uganda. NAPE work with young people through their sustainability school, which has supported communities to hold the government accountable and demand their rights since 2010. They also hold sustainability clubs in primary and secondary schools, and use their community radio to amplify the voices of young people and raise awareness of the issues that affect them.

"I went [to Norway] to learn and share, to see how they engage youth and bring this back to Uganda. We talked about how youth are powerful and can change the world!"

Floor was volunteering in the Milieudefensie / FoE Netherlands deforestation campaign when she participated in the exchange to Cameroon. Both groups work extensively on deforestation due to palm oil. Centre pour l'Environnement et le Development / FoE Cameroon work with locally impacted communities, and Milieudefensie campaign to prevent the causes of deforestation, for instance encouraging Dutch banks to stop funding destructive palm oil plantations.

CED work with local indigenous communities to educate them about their rights. They have a human rights defenders project and there are lots of young people involved in this. Floor spoke with these young activists and filmed interviews to share in the Netherlands.

She also went on a field visit to a Bagyeli community in south Cameroon. This is a traditionally nomadic indigenous group that have recently settled. They have almost lost all of the forest that they depend on for their livelihood, culture, spirituality and traditional medicine.

Floor participated in a group discussion with the community, and learnt that water pollution was a big issue for them and many have health problems. The working conditions on plantations are very bad and there is no health care or protections for workers who are injured in their work.

Floor’s visit was very motivating, and she was particularly inspired by meeting a community of women who lead the struggle against palm oil.
Sampson, from the Sustainable Development Institute / FoE Liberia visited Ireland to spend time with Young Friends of the Earth Ireland. He observed a lot of similarities in the advocacy work that the groups do, including holding meetings to bring together different groups who are working on similar issues, and hosting sessions with stakeholders discussing the dangers of a particular process and asking for recommendations. But one key difference was the street protests about transition from gas to renewables that he took part in. This was a new experience and something that he had not participated in Liberia. Seeing the relative freedom youth in some European countries have to participate in street actions made it clearer what kind of joint solidarity campaigns and projects youth in the two regions could participate in.

“The entire trip to Ireland under the exchange program was full of inspiration and excitement. In Ireland I had the opportunity to speak for the first time to group of young people from a different race and excitingly, they were very keen to hear stories from my country Liberia. And at the end of the lecture session, I was asked so many questions concerning the work we are doing in Liberia.”

Getting a visa to travel to Ireland was a serious challenge however, and the trip was delayed due to the late arrival of the visa from Sierra Leone, as there is no Irish embassy in Liberia.

Read about Meaghan’s trip from Ireland to Liberia here: https://www.stand.ie/palm-oil-ravaging-the-planets-lungs-and-tearing-communities-apart/
Organising youth exchanges
Principles & tips

● **Budget**
  ○ Avoid making assumptions. Cost cutting solutions such as staying in the homes of hosting organisation may not be suitable or even safe in some countries. Ensure to consult participating groups fully about what their needs are in hosting exchanges and budget accordingly.
  ○ Maximise the experience. In order to make the most out of the opportunity it is likely participants will need to travel to other parts of the country or attend events. Not having budget for this makes planning a valuable exchange much harder!

● **Picking partners**
  ○ Fund common ground. Previous cooperation between groups, similarities in context and shared resistance targets can enable more effective shared learning.
  ○ Make sure they are committed. Host organisations must understand the value of the project and share the responsibility, rather than all resting all responsibility on young staff and volunteers involved.
  ○ Speak the language. If possible, a shared language between partner organisations can massively improve learning.

● **Solidarity**
  ○ Make them mutual. Unless there is a specific reason, make sure exchanges go both ways as there is so much we can all learn from each other.

● **Time**
  ○ Consider you target audience. Who the exchanges be for? Short 1-4 week exchanges may be more suitable for staff members, whereas some youth may be interested in longer-term projects of several months.
  ○ What is the desired outcome? To actively participate in the work of a group in another country you need more than a couple of weeks.

Planning the exchange (hosts)

● **Communicate**
  ○ Give a cultural briefing. Do not assume that someone visiting from another continent will know what clothes to bring, how safe it is.
  ○ Find out their needs. Do not assume that they will have the same religious, dietary or accessibility needs as you.
  ○ Get everyone involved. Speak well in advance about both sides’ aims and objectives for the exchange. Involve participants in the planning stages of the exchange as much as possible.
  ○ Plan the agenda. Give them an agenda well in advance. This will help to identify anything that may be challenging for them with enough time to make changes.
- Remember to listen. Actually listen to what they are telling you they need. They probably know better than you do.

- Get the timing right
  - Start way in advance. Starting planning well in advance allows discussion with the participant and time to get visas if needed.
  - Stay longer! If budget allows and it is convenient for the participant, make the engage as long as possible. This allows them to see more, have deeper discussions and get involved in the work being done by the host organisation.
  - Clashing can be good. Although it may seem counterintuitive, it often works best to arrange the exchange during a busy time. This allows the participant to see the actual work being done, get involved and meet activists.

- Meeting people
  - Go to the grassroots. Some of the most meaningful experiences came meeting with frontline communities and grassroots groups. This allows them to truly understand the issues you are working on and it can be transformative to a local campaign to be able to share stories and connect with the global struggle.
  - Reach out to the youth. Create spaces for the participant to speak with local young people about what they care about and the issues facing them.

- Language
  - Get translation. If there is not a common language, it will be essential to arrange translation.
  - Use alternative methods. If the participant is meeting with youth or communities where there isn’t a shared language, can you use other methods such as games or image theatre to enable sharing of ideas?

Going on exchange

- Research the:
  - Local context. Invest some time in learning about the history, culture, religion(s) and current context of the country you are visiting.
  - Language. If you do not already share a language are you able to learn even a few phrases to be able to communicate with communities?
  - Yourself. Spend some time thinking about: the history of your own country; your own position in the world; what you do or don’t have access to; what things might have significantly shaped your worldview; what assumptions do you have about the country you are visiting and where have they come from?

- Communicate
  - Your needs. Communicate clearly your needs when you on exchange, such as how far can you walk, what are you dietary requirements, what are your religious needs?
  - Your questions. If you do not know what clothes are acceptable to wear, what something means or whether you should go to a certain part of town: ask your host!
- Remember to listen. Actually listen to what your host is telling you about their country. They probably know better than you do.

- **Share**
  - Bring a gift. Bring something from your country to share with your host, whether that is food, art or music!
  - Record your experiences. Through a blog, a diary, a video diary or photographs, make sure to document your time on exchange and the things you have learnt.

After the exchange

- **Spread the knowledge**
  - Within groups. Present your experiences with your local and national group. Discuss with them how what you have learnt should influence the way they work going forward.
  - Wider. Publish blogs, videos and social media posts. Give talks and presentations. Tell your friends, your parents and your colleagues. Let everyone know we need an intersectional, global climate justice movement!

- **Stay in contact**
  - Nurture connections. Try to maintain friendships you made during the exchange. Our movement is stronger when we are connected.
  - Establish campaigns. If possible, use that time learning deeply about another group’s work to strengthen your solidarity work and maybe even set up a joint campaign against a common target!