Strengthening cross-regional solidarity

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

This project was founded on the principle of solidarity. By this we mean mutual support and respect for people across the world resisting environmental, climate and social injustices. The exchanges showed us how much we could learn from our partner group in both regions. The cross-regional meetings showed us how much we could learn from each individual in the group and from being together, both within and across regions.

We explored the concept of solidarity throughout the two years and examined how it worked within our groups, regions and internationally. There were some key moments where we tried to act in solidarity with each other or with external groups. Some of these are explored in the case studies that follow.

The project made it clear to us how much our struggles are connected. Whether that was seeing parallels between campaigns, ways of working or injustices we face in each of our countries, or identifying how corporations based in the European region are driving destruction in the African region.

Our fight is global so our movement has to be global as well. We realised that the corporations and money fueling our fights can travel freely across the world, while we faced huge challenges getting all of our participants in the same place, only achieving this once throughout the duration of the whole project due to difficulties accessing visas.

We identified that sometimes charity is disguised as solidarity. We named the concept of ‘white saviorism’ which often characterises youth projects between Europe and Africa. Typically this is when European charities send volunteers to ‘help’ in other regions without listening to the needs and knowledge of local people.

We strove instead to ensure collaborative leadership throughout the project, with solidarity as a mutual aim and all participants simultaneously taking on the role of learner and teacher. We faced challenges in doing this due to an imbalance of resources between Europe and Africa and restriction of participation of some African participants who could not access visas to attend meetings or exchanges in Europe.

“If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

- Lilla Watson

“The importance of listening is a key learning for me from this youth exchange between Africa and Europe. It has re-echoed the words: if not clear, ask for clarification, if in doubt, ask a question and if understood, reiterate to be sure you are on the same plate. I have come to see listening as an essential ingredient required to prepare the meal called solidarity, which was pivotal in this project and in our daily works”

- Babawale, Nigeria
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Case Studies

Visiting impacted communities to strengthen solidarity

Visiting frontline communities was a central part of most of the cross-regional exchanges and meetings, and played an important role in strengthening solidarity between the groups. This exchange of knowledge and experience was in most cases beneficial for all parties, enabling both African and European participants to develop a deeper sense of the ways in which our struggles are connected, and a greater commitment to supporting each other in these struggles.

Tonje from Natur Og Ungom/YFoE Norway went on a ‘Toxic Tour’ in Durban while at a cross-regional meeting in Durban.

“I was shocked when we stood by an oil refinery, and also right next to the garden of a family. These factories were next to densely populated areas. We could see smoke coming out of the pipes at the factory. This smoke spread over houses like a kind of sick gray cloud falling over ceilings. I was really surprised when I realized that something of the same thing happens in Norway. We like to stamp ourselves as a fair and green state and consider ourselves one of the world’s richest and most democratic countries. But I could draw the parallels in the way multinational companies act in Norway. Mining companies want to dump toxic waste in fjords like Førdefjorden at the expense of local people, wildlife, fishing, agriculture and tourism.

I realised how important it is to support those who work in these areas. Maybe your local group or you as an individual can send frontline communities a letter or e-mail. Think how cool it would be to know that you have people in a country far away cheering on you and supporting you in the hard fight you’re fighting.

Even if you cannot make a big difference alone we are strong together!”

Martine from Natur Og Ungom went on exchange to Uganda with National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE)/FoE Uganda. She visited communities on the frontline of the oil industry.

Rev. Musiimenta of Butimba Sustainability Village said they were pleased by the realisation that they were not the only ones in the struggle for the rights of grassroots communities.

“I am surprised that oil is still a problem to even countries that have been producing it for a long time and have a lot of money like Norway. But the fact that there are other activists like you in other parts of the world fighting for environmental and social justice gives a lot of hope and courage to carry on”

Martine speaks at Butimba sustainability village about Norway’s struggle against Coal
Writing a collective letter on visa injustice

At the second cross-regional meeting of the project, which took place in Brussels, Belgium, four participants from Africa were unable to join due to difficulties accessing visas. Participants from both regions collaborated to write an open letter to the European Union stating the injustice of denying participants from the Global South access to these kind of spaces in Europe. We also highlighted in the letter the disproportionate historical contribution to climate change from European states and the hypocrisy of tightening borders as the impact of this is being felt across the world.

This action was an act of solidarity with those whose visas were refused, and youth described how it was an important moment for the building of relationships of trust between the two regions.

“It is time that Europe starts listening to the communities in the Global South who live on the frontlines of climate change. It is time to stop imposing market based solutions (such as REDD) that enable corporations and governments of the Global North to continue polluting. It is time that Europe takes responsibility for the disasters that climate change is causing in the Global South, such as the mudslide and heavy flooding in Sierra Leone in August 2017, the hurricane that killed over 800 people in Haiti in October 2016, recent devastations provoked by Irma in the Caribbean and the many other disasters caused by extreme weather and exacerbated by historic, global inequality. It is time Europe acknowledges the outflow of people who are displaced by this climate violence, rather than justifying inaction with narratives that treat people as other and absolves responsibility. It is time that we start breaking down the walls of this fortress.”

– An extract from the collective letter

Read the full letter here: http://www.foeurope.org/climate-justice-open-letter
Participants in the project evaluation meeting in Amsterdam 2018 discuss the challenges faced during the project in getting visas.

“During this project we’ve come across the challenge of getting visas to bring people to meetings in Europe. The process was not only traumatizing for African activists, but they could not participate fully in the meetings. If we are to build an intercultural & inclusive movement for all people, we need freedom of movement for all people.” Mariska.

“While the European visa system makes it hard for the African activists to attend meetings in Europe, young people are experiencing additional discrimination because of their lack of savings or low incomes.” Fiona.

“We need to take account of these challenges when we plan international exchanges - one solution would be to hold more meetings in Africa. I would also like for people to write to the European embassies to let them know that we are not going to Europe to stay but to attend meetings.” Sampson.
Palm Oil solidarity action in Amsterdam

We participated in several solidarity actions together over the course of the project, including visiting and showing support with communities impacted by palm oil plantations in Liberia and gas extraction in the Netherlands.

During a cross regional event in Amsterdam we participated a Milieudefensie (FoE Netherlands) action to get Dutch banks to remove their investments from destructive palm oil plantations in countries including Nigeria, Liberia and Uganda. We visited a branch of the bank and asked passers-by to sign postcards calling for the removal of the investments. Later we delivered these postcards and our message to the branch manager. Milieudefensie has been doing this repeatedly at branches across the country.

Afterwards we discussed how that kind of action may not be so easy to do in some of our countries where there is less freedom to protest. It was an example of how we can use the power some of us have, as customers of these banks and as citizens in countries where it is relatively safe to speak up, to challenge injustices across the world. We also noted that this campaign is successful because of the relationship and consultation that Milieudefensie has done with local people impacted by the palm oil plantations.

It was powerful to have people from some of the countries where the impacts of palm oil plantations are currently being felt when speaking to the public and the bank manager. We realised the importance of using these relationships and connections and the power of personal narratives in this kind of campaigning work.
This tool was used at the first cross-regional meeting of this project in order for participants to explore and understand the interrelated history of our two continents, particularly European colonisation of Africa, and the ongoing legacies of this. Participants reflected on how this was an important starting point for working collaboratively between the regions - we realised that building a shared understanding of the history between the regions enables us to act in more meaningful solidarity with one another, as it informs our analysis of colonialism as a root cause of current environmental injustice.

**Description:**

Each participant is asked in advance (e.g. two weeks before the event by email) to research and prepare five significant moments in the history of their own country, which happened as a result of its relationship with the other continent. Start with an early event – this probably will link to colonisation – and end with a more recent one.

The facilitator prepares a long blank timeline for the wall and introduces the session.

Everyone is given 5 minutes to put their five significant moments onto cards. When ready, the facilitator invites everyone to place their cards in the appropriate place on the timeline, then asks each person to present their card and the significant moment it describes.

Gradually, a collective timeline is built connecting all the countries and regions present.

Questions and answers can be given at any moment during the activity to go deeper into topics and events.

**Additional elements or variations:**

The facilitator can in addition prepare general cards with either pictures and/or text from other important or momentous historical moments that are relevant to the topic. Each participant can be given one or several cards, and can discuss in pairs or alone what it is, where it dates from and what its significance is, to then be added as appropriate to the timeline.

There are different ways of presenting the timeline and it is up to the facilitator to decide how they want to do it. For example, you can go chronologically from the earliest to latest dates, or country by country.

*This tool was developed and delivered by Jeanne Prinsloo of the Friends of the Earth South Africa/groundWork “Environmental Justice School”. It was written up by Sophie Manson.*
Strengthening cross-regional solidarity: Principles & Tips

- Relationships. Long term projects and relationships between groups enable more meaningful solidarity as we understand each others contexts and the struggles more thoroughly.
  - Projects like the Africa-Europe exchange programme are important for developing these relationships at different levels of the federation so that volunteers, youth groups and junior staff understand the strength of the federation and the importance of supporting our member groups across the world.
  - Spend the time and resources building these relationships.

- Listen. Local people and organisations understand their struggle the best. Solidarity actions or campaigns must be developed in collaboration with these people and not based on what your group thinks is best.
  - If possible, visit the communities most affected and consult them on how best you can support their work.

- Share power. Use the power and privileges you have to support other struggles, but understand why that is the case and try to share the space you have with others.
  - Amplify the voices and work of those on the frontline, rather than speaking for people.
  - Identify key targets that you have access to, whether that is company headquarters or embassies.
  - If possible, share resources and offer capacity to frontline groups, such as taking on administrative tasks.

- Embed solidarity in your strategy. Our struggles are connected, therefore it is strategic to be connected with other groups facing similar issues.
  - Try to find ways to avoid funder requirements, continuous short term projects and organisational bureaucracy from limiting the solidarity you can show with groups on the frontline.

- Support other struggles. We know that climate justice is linked to struggles for gender justice, free movement of people and many others.
  - Show up to other groups demonstrations and support their actions.

- Understand context. It is essential to take time to understand historical and contemporary relationships between countries and continents and consider how this impacts the way you do solidarity work.
Youth at the evaluation meeting in Amsterdam share learnings on solidarity