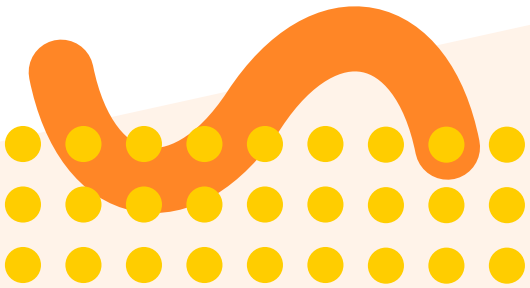
EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY
Fergal Barr

Solidarity as the ‘cornerstone’ of social cohesion in a deeply divided society

Northern Ireland – A case in point



NORTHERN IRELAND ◦ SOLIDARITY ◦ SOLIDARNOŚĆ ◦ INTERNATIONAL YOUTH WORK ◦ EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS ◦ SECTARIAN ◦ CATHOLIC ◦ PROTESTANT ◦ NATIONALIST ◦ REPUBLICAN ◦ UNIONIST ◦ LOYALIST ◦ GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT ◦ UNITY ◦ EMPATHY ◦ COMPASSION ◦ SUPPORT ◦ HUMAN RIGHTS ◦ ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP ◦ INCLUSION ◦ RICHARD MOORE ◦ COLIN PARRY ◦ JO BERRY ◦ TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between solidarity and its potential for healing divisions in Northern Ireland. It puts into context the challenges that the legacy of 'The Troubles' poses for reaching greater levels of solidarity which has often been generated by international youth work opportunities through Erasmus+. However, it has the potential to be enriched further by the European Solidarity Corps. The paper argues that international youth work can create the conditions to nurture solidarity and can act as an effective model for repairing relationships. does this by providing evidence to support such a claim, explores values that underpin solidarity and how these also link to the recently established four 'cornerstones' of solidarity. In addition, the paper makes the case for solidarity as a basis for transforming existing relationships, and more importantly argues that solidarity is the 'cornerstone' of a more socially cohesive Northern Ireland.

1. How Do You Solve a Problem Like Northern Ireland?

1.1 Solidarity - a ray of light in an ocean of darkness

The first time I came across the word solidarity (I'm reasonably certain) was back in 1982 when Lech Walesa, leader of the Solidarność movement in Poland, led protests over food shortages and the price of consumer products... Solidarity [a Trade Union] wanted to end Soviet control of the country.' (BBC)

To those of us living in the West, and as a youngster growing up in Northern Ireland, Solidarity was synonymous with images of workers walking in unison behind the potent symbol of the Solidarność banner, the red and white colours of Poland adorned with a difficult-to-pronounce-word (for us native English speakers) but its meaning was clear. The images were even clearer – workers uniting as one against someone or something but ultimately for something much better.

There was common ground, a common enemy, clear goals, and the workers, supported by 'the people,' were leading. The demand for something different had arrived, a pivotal moment, a tipping point, change was in the air! There was unity of purpose. The rest as they say is history.

What was clear from daily life in Northern Ireland was that any such unity of purpose, any standing together, any supporting of one another or showing even the remotest sense of solidarity to brothers and sisters across the political divide was virtually non-existent. Not only was it close to non-existent, it simply wasn't the 'done-thing.' Exhibiting any kind of empathy and compassion with someone of a different religion was laden with risk. It could effectively cost you your life.

1.2 The situation in Northern Ireland – Then!

Whilst the Solidarność movement was changing the political landscape in Poland, in Northern Ireland we were still busy bombing, shooting, maiming and killing each other. That might sound a bit glib but that was 'our reality.' It was a conflict between two communities, which ironically believed in the same God, or at least to the outsider, it appeared that way.

Of course, as is often the case with conflicts, it was much more nuanced and complex than this but it had all the appearance of a 'sectarian bloodbath' between two religious tribes. What was severely lacking in Northern Ireland was any real form of solidarity. Further on I will explain how greater solidarity among the communities in Northern Ireland have helped heal some of the division in our society.

It's important to understand some of the context in Northern Ireland. Any support for the Solidarność movement in Northern Ireland would most certainly have been greater among the Catholic community. Poland is after all a Catholic country. Pope John Paul II was Polish, he visited Ireland in the first year of his papacy, and amongst some this was viewed as a semi-political move in the context of politics in Ireland. Workers in Poland were defying the Government, this is not something that traditionally happens amongst the Protestant community in Northern Ireland - more 'stereotypically', it is a feature of the Catholic community. In Northern Ireland, perception is (almost) everything and even the smallest of gestures can be viewed as antagonistic.

In effect, Catholics - traditionally Irish, Nationalist and Republican - were, if not openly supporting Solidarność, at least sympathetic to it. Protestants on the other hand - British, Unionist and Loyalist by tradition - were on the side of the Government. This is how it has traditionally worked in Northern Ireland – that is why you will often find Palestinian flags in Catholic areas and Israeli flags in Protestant areas. The story of the underdog rising up against his master, or oppressor, depending on how you look at it, is a story that resonates with the Catholic community, and where one side takes a position on any issue, the other side must take the opposing view. In simple terms, even the word solidarity, would conjure up particular perceptions.

1.3 The situation in Northern Ireland – Now!

Things have changed though over the years. We have had respected ceasefires from the main paramilitaries since 1994 and the 'Good Friday Peace Agreement' came into force in 1998. Since then, it has been largely peaceful. We have in effect stopped killing each other, we live in a relative peace and we manage our relationships much better than we did previously, the emphasis being on managing!

However, it remains that 93-94% of our population live along segregated lines and around the same figure attend different secondary and grammar schools defined by religious tradition (Eastern 2019). This does not take away from the good work that goes on in Northern Ireland, nor the major achievements we have accomplished since the 1990s, but the reality is that under the surface, we still live separate and divisive lives, and our peace is more mutual accommodation than a genuine attempt to reach integration.

2. Solidarity and its Relation to Securing Social Cohesion in a Divided Society

2.1 Four important values

Unlike the Solidarity movement in 1980s Poland, there remains no 'common ground' in Northern Ireland - at least not constitutionally speaking, i.e., some want a United Ireland whilst others wish to remain part of the UK.

There is no common enemy for Catholics and Protestants to unite behind, and there are no clear goals with regard to what the future might look like. Solidarność was led by worker 'revolt', whereas traditional industries in Northern Ireland that might have brought workers together in a common cause have all but disappeared. In the early 20th century, there were occasions when workers from both Catholic and Protestant communities came together to 'fight' on common issues but this quickly dissipated.

Anything, other than the desire for peace, that might illicit the overwhelming support of the people is virtually non-existent. Even the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which brought most of the 'warring parties' to a negotiated settlement, (it was more a treaty than settlement), was often viewed through the prism of 'a gain for them must be a loss for us,' but the bigger prize of an end to violence won over the majority.

Even though it brought us closer to peace, there was (and remains still) no common ground, no common enemy, no common vision, no common consensus, and most certainly, is and was, not led by the people. It was voted for by the majority of people after much protracted, painful and tentative negotiations. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to these as The Commonalities.

Four specific values that one might tend to associate with solidarity – unity, empathy, compassion, and support (for one another) - however were lacking when the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement reached its climax in 1998.

What was more in evidence at the time was an overriding desire to end the killing and bombing, more so than any great desire to accommodate and co-operate with one another in any kind of lasting, visible and meaningful way. The desire to achieve an end to the violence made agreement possible.

Since then, it has taken years to resolve many outstanding issues that were left unresolved by the Agreement itself, and even now for example, the rights of (and reparation for) victims of the conflict still drags on, over 20 years later.

It's only in the time that has elapsed since the agreement was signed that these four values have begun to find a way into our everyday lives. We still don't have any greater numbers of people living in integrated communities but people are more united in the belief (now than ever before) that we cannot go back to violence.

2.2 Four values and four cornerstones

The recently published 4Thought For Solidarity study identifies 4Cornerstones [Human Rights, Active Citizenship, Inclusion and Empathy]... as being the concepts closest to solidarity both in theory and practice.

Personally for me, empathy is automatically a core value in solidarity, and as mentioned is one of the four cornerstones highlighted in the 4Thought for Solidarity study. However, I do not see a lot of distance between it and Inclusion and Support. You might choose to stand with someone to ensure they are included and feel supported, for example joining a rally to stand with members of the LGBTQI+ community.

Likewise, committing to a Rights-based approach might lead to your adopting a more compassionate mind-set where particular communities are concerned, e.g. migrants, single parents, the disabled. Becoming an active citizen might 'force' you to campaign with others you wouldn't normally associate with but might Unite you on a key fundamental issue.

There are countless examples in Northern Ireland where those directly affected by violence have sought to understand the position of the 'other.'

Richard Moore famously reconciled with the British Soldier who blinded him with a plastic bullet on the streets of Derry. Colin Parry who lost his son to the IRA in a bombing in Warrington in England, embarked on a journey to understand the motivation of those who killed his son. Jo Berry forgave the man who planted the bomb that killed her father at the British Conservative Party conference in Brighton, in 1984.

It should be noted that these types of reconciliation have tended to come about when space is created, thus allowing people to reconcile. This might be when there is a change in external circumstances, for example, when actual threats or the perception of the threat no longer exists or when politicians are seen to be engaging in the public space or when violence has decreased or is absent.

If we in Northern Ireland or any country for that matter emerging from conflict are to have any semblance of normality, we need a stronger sense of solidarity. That cannot be achieved without some or all of these essential elements referred to above, whether it's those that I have chosen, or any of the four cornerstones, or perhaps even a combination of both.

3. International Youth Work: An Effective Means of Nurturing Solidarity

3.1 Growing evidence of the value of International Youth Work at national and international level

There is a growing evidence base that participation in International Youth Work can support the journey towards solidarity. It does so by providing space and time to address and reconcile differences or build understanding between people from diverse communities. It also equips individuals to participate in and lead the spaces that international youth work creates.

A survey[1] of over 300 practitioners in 2014 (including European practitioners)[2] found that the main benefits of international youth work to young people included an increase in confidence and self-esteem (66.31%), learning about [their] own culture or other cultures (60.28%), an increase in tolerance and acceptance of 'others' (56.38%) and greater self-awareness (36.17%).

A study of the Youth in Action Programme also found that participation in its activities led to 'considerable development of competences for citizenship... positive impact on behaviour... significant effects on organisations in the direction of improved quality of support... [and] positive impacts on personal development of participants' (Ohana 2016).

Further studies (SALTO Inclusion and Diversity) have also reported the benefits for young people (and practitioners) from participation in international youth work. Evidently, opportunities created by international youth work are more likely to ensure a return to violence, in the case of Northern Ireland, is limited.

International youth work provides opportunities that equip participants to engage with 'the others'. In so doing they can begin to build solidarity with those they would normally never meet, never mind associate with or even build friendships with.

The Commonalities I referred to earlier, certainly in the context of International Youth Work, become the stories that people share. The common enemy becomes the issues of inequality and injustice that need to be addressed. Clear goals become the desired change participants want to see, and participants themselves unite behind a common movement, even if it is not a movement in the truest sense of the word, but in this case a follow-up action decided upon during the course of a programme. The 'commonality' becomes the space in which solidarity is sought.

3.2 Evidence of the difference international youth work makes in Northern Ireland

Since 2008, the 'Inside Out Programme', based in Northern Ireland, has been involved in promoting international learning opportunities through its own 'Leadership through Intercultural Dialogue Programme' (LID). It has enabled access to more than 300 international learning opportunities for no less than 200 different individuals,from young people to youth workers from across Northern Ireland, in more than 100 of its programmes.

Back in 2013, Inside Out commissioned an evaluation of LID. In the period between April 2008 and September 2013, the organisation provided international opportunities for 141 different individuals: 42 young people, 43 youth workers, 22 young leaders and 34 other practitioners with a remit for young people,from 46 different organisations in 62 programmes in more than 20 countries.

The evaluation found that its programme of activities was a 'significant contributing factor to enhanced cultural diversity, interculturalism and good relations... the two foremost strengths of the programme identified were 'Enhanced Interculturalism' and 'Bringing People Together.' (Riggs 2012).

A follow-up conference in 2015, facilitated by an international team of facilitators and documented by an external consultant, brought together 47 people from across a range of sectors. The conference conclusions included:

International experience can build confidence in individuals to communicate and collaborate broadly without (or with less) fear of difference; People who have participated in international experiences reflect that they are more open, more engaging, are more active in seeking to work with others, and more embracing of the value of diversity; International experience brings a new, often fresh, perspective on issues that can reach an impasse when persistently viewed from the same standpoint(s).

In a 2014 report the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, found that International Youth Work 'makes a significant contribution to the personal and social development of young people and there is evidence that anticipated learning outcomes are delivered in a relatively short period of time [in]... environments where identity, nationality, culture and religions are not necessarily seen as divisive. This produces a basis from which to explore and appreciate diversity.' (Youth Council for Northern Ireland 2014. p6).

4. Erasmus+ and Solidarity

4.1 The growing influence of Erasmus+ in creating space for solidarity

Erasmus+ has proven that it has the power to promote a greater sense of solidarity between people by creating space and time for the transformation of relationships. EVS was very much part of that by providing short and longer-term intense learning opportunities.

The European Solidarity Corps, which succeeded EVS, not only builds upon those achievements, but by ensuring that the experience offered is not merely about volunteering, it bolsters this approach by deepening the connection between volunteers and the setting where volunteers might find themselves located.

Northern Ireland's Belfast-based NGO, Tools for Solidarity, states categorically that '[it]...cannot imagine its existence without international volunteers. Annually we host 7-9 volunteers through the European Solidarity Corp and EIRENE programmes.' (Tools for Solidarity).

With EVS, a volunteer might have had many reasons to select a particular destination for their volunteering placement. The European Solidarity Corps 'demands' more thought be put into the rationale and meaning so as to demonstrate evidence of solidarity in the work they will undertake as part of their volunteering.

Traditionally, the youth exchange, seminar, job shadowing and training courses, have provided an intense environment, albeit over a shorter period. This has often proven transformational as is evidenced by findings from LID.

In a country like Northern Ireland, where people tend not to venture out of their comfort zones too often, or even out of their respective communities for that matter, the arrival of a volunteer from overseas challenges 'locals' to re-think their ideas, their values, their perceptions and so on. In doing so, this increases the likelihood of their developing patience, tolerance, communication and empathy. Likewise, the volunteer goes through a similar experience, but from a different perspective, as they endeavour to understand, adapt to and settle into their new community.

Based on findings from evaluations of Erasmus+, evidence collated supports the notion that international opportunities have the power to transform relationships and in turn nurture solidarity between people. What is it about the experience however, that supports this claim? What is the process that a young person (or even practitioner for that matter), might go through that sets it aside from their normal day-to-day experiences?

4.2 Solidarity – an open secret in transforming relationships

When taking part in a Solidarity Project, the environment, interactions, pressures and dynamic is entirely different from that of any young person's 'normal' setting. For example, the challenges, ideas and opinions of others they have to contend with, extends and broadens an individual's capacity to at least begin to tolerate in the first instance, and accept in the second, differences, that they may not have had to countenance before. This applies equally to both the volunteer and the people of the community they find themselves in. Although for those volunteers arriving, they have to first adapt to their new surroundings, before the hosting community begins to take stock of their presence and in turn learns to have a greater appreciation of the dynamic that an international volunteer brings.

Moreover, when an individual begins to think more critically about their own values and beliefs when contrasted with those they have met for only the first time, they begin to rethink their own narrative that they have historically articulated in their native or rather 'natural' environment. They do so because they are no longer merely in the company of their own peers, they are often having to share a meeting space, meal times, accommodation, group activities and one-to-one scenarios with 'others', in the most intensive of environments. Hearing diverse views can also open up space for them to share ideas that previously would have been a step

too far among their own peers. That in essence is where solidarity begins – connecting with others and sharing stories and experiences.

Such impact can also be captured, and measured with much greater effect, because it's captured in real time using a wide range of tailored methodologies in-situ and for that particular moment. For example, behaviour comes into much sharper focus in a diverse range of activities over a shorter and more intensive period. The result is that there is no escape or hiding place as you just can't get up and leave and go home.

You have to look into the 'whites' of people's eyes and have to be more accountable for your views and actions because you have to explain them there and then, often against the unhindered critique of others. In addition, this accountability and learning can be recorded, evidenced, monitored, evaluated and supported whilst individuals are still in that environment as opposed to the next time they come into their own youth club or group work session.

The nature of the interaction is also 'full-on' as it 'forces' individuals to adapt and overcome, thus maturing more quickly and growing in stature more readily. Friendships and romance often blossom ensuring that those with previously deeply-held convictions are more open to reflection and change, if only to make an impression on another person. Support is on-hand throughout the period of the programme from committed staff, something which is often not available when the club doors shut or the group session ends.

Often young people find common ground with others for the issues they face on a daily basis and the environment they occupy for that period. It creates space, time and support not previously or readily available 'at home' or when sharing a neutral or common space with 'others.' Momentum is created and captured, and can be built upon almost instantly rather than the 'slow-burn' that is often the case in youth work, providing an in-road to a young person who previously might have been 'out of reach.'

5. Solidarity as the Foundation for a More Socially Cohesive Northern Ireland

5.1 'The problem' – diversity!

Diversity, or rather the lack of it, is detrimental to the long-term future in Northern Ireland – 98% of the population is white, with 88% born in Northern Ireland (World Population Review 2020). Whilst offering a sense of security to the indigenous population, it also limits capacity to engage with and embrace others who are different and thus limits the ability to change. The more diverse a community, people or nation are, the greater its capacity to contend with change. The more diverse the community, people or nation, the greater

its ability to accept, understand and transform itself. Northern Ireland's population is unlikely to become much more diverse than it is already, so any transformation is going to have to come from within. Opportunities available through the likes of Erasmus+ can only make a positive contribution to that transformation.

Change and Transformation come about because of having to deal with difference. For example, every time a young person from Northern Ireland engages with one of their international peers, they have to 'slow down' when speaking in order to be understood, literally. They also have to pronounce their words more clearly, and have to be more patient so that people can understand more of what is said, how it is said and make sense of the tone used, even if just to 'get' the nuance of the message.

This of course has the effect of enhancing their connection with individuals different to themselves and thus builds a greater sense of solidarity with that 'other' person. They know there is a need to support them as they come to terms with accents, pronunciation, tone, wording, context and presumptions among other things.

5.2 International youth work – an effective model for fixing 'the problem'

International youth work is not alone in building solidarity in Northern Ireland, nor should it be the single torch bearer for such a venture either. It would be unfair, not to mention unrealistic. All too often in the past, we have seen occasions where youth work was viewed as a panacea for various societal ills. This is not one of them.

What international youth work does demonstrate however, and particularly with regard to Northern Ireland, is an effective model in healing division, as well as building relationships not in need of repair or reparation. Placing solidarity at the core of the process is the key to achieving social cohesion.

By providing opportunities for members of the wider youth work community to engage with and learn about diversity outside of their normal environment, you 'allow' or enable individuals to change more quickly and more freely.

Individuals can more easily reflect on their identity with 'others' (from different countries) who do not pose an immediate threat. They do not have to fear 'losing face', something that comes more readily by being in close proximity to your immediate 'neighbours'. They can build a degree of solidarity with them through their unique story and their issues.

Many of the characteristics required for nurturing reconciliation, e.g. clarifying 'personal attitudes, values and beliefs; recognise, understand and respect difference; [and] develop[ing] respect for others' (Curriculum Development Unit 2003. p12) are often exhibited in youth work. Youth work has often been at the fore of building relationships between diverse communities and has over decades built practice and experience in this area.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that the international setting can contribute to both the personal and social development of young people as well as reconciliation between divided communities. Erasmus+ has contributed much to this but the introduction of the European Solidarity Corps provides an even more intensive experience to nurture solidarity between people of differing traditions.

Our need to embrace international opportunities, not only presented by Erasmus+ (and the incoming Erasmus Programme) but also the European Solidarity Corps has struggled to achieve endorsement at policy level within youth work in Northern Ireland.

In the Department of Education's 'Priorities for Youth' policy document, European Youth Work was merely an area in 'which local youth organisations should be encouraged to explore.' There were no policy directions or obligations set aside and the decision to engage has been left to the discretion of practitioners on the ground.

However, there is now a greater recognition of the need for participation in International Youth Work and it is included in some local local and regional youth work plans but the level of involvement among youth work organisations in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps has been limited.

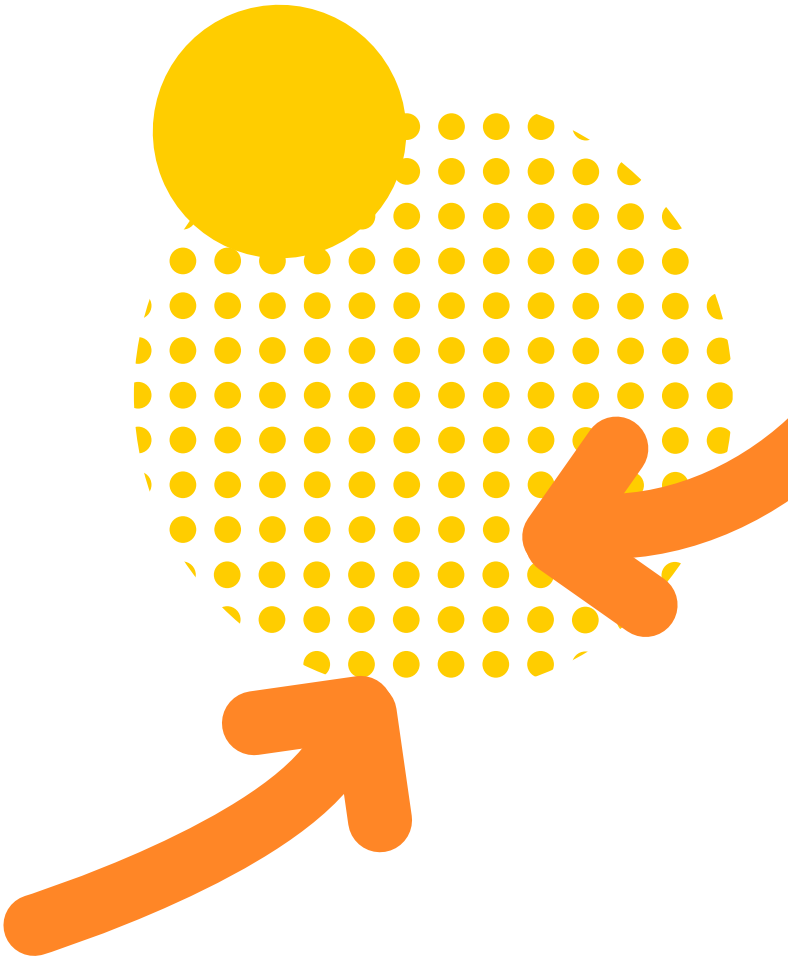
These programmes support the development of leadership and capacity building. When we dig a little deeper, it becomes obvious solidarity with one another is at the core of the many successful relationships generated by programmes such as Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. With solidarity comes greater social cohesion.

The diverse and unique nature of non-formal education and the various interactive mediums it employs and advocates, e.g. training courses, youth exchanges, seminars, planning meetings, study visits, etc. and more recently, the European Solidarity Corps, increases the capacity of individuals to reconcile because it engages them in intercultural dialogue, which as research suggests 'offers much hope to peace and harmony among nations' (Holmes 2014).

Situations where you empathise with another person, moments where you can feel their pain, where their story resonates with you, and where you sacrifice your own needs to support theirs, these are the times when you change your behaviour, and/or your mind, and prioritise the needs of others before your own. Where you are prepared to stand with others against the odds or against others, this is what gives solidarity its essence, this is what makes it meaningful and makes change in a divided society possible.

It is often the gestures you make and the decisions you take when you extend yourself beyond 'the norm,' and out of your comfort zone that makes change possible. When you step across 'party lines' or you shift your position or show support for your adversary by stepping into their shoes for a moment, this encompasses the true meaning of solidarity and it is this that increases the likelihood of it being reciprocated.

Solidarity is at the core of a future transformed Northern Ireland and international youth work is one way of helping us to achieve that.



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[2] 87% of which were either working directly or indirectly with young people; at least one-quarter had been involved in a minimum of 16 international youth work programmes; 70% of respondents had experienced at least 3 programmes

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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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