# A Bridge to Inclusion: Empowering Marginalised Target Groups Through Solidarity Projects



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# **ABSTRACT**

This paper draws on the concrete experience of working with a hard-to-reach target group facing several key markers of disadvantage, namely young migrants from Mali. The work featured is in the framework of the Berlin-based Solidarity Project "Café Bamako". Solidarity Projects provide promising opportunities within the framework of the European Solidarity Corps for empowering young people with fewer opportunities. It empowers them to participate more fully in economic, social and cultural life. It presents potential pathways to social inclusion through fostering engagement with issues that are relevant to disadvantaged young people's lived experience. The paper seeks to go beyond an understanding of solidarity that mainly applies to the support and assistance provided by civil society towards disadvantaged groups. It shifts the focus to the ways in which the young migrants can contribute to and enrich their own new communities – and in doing so, empower themselves – through their own civic engagement.

### 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the potential of European Solidarity Corps Solidarity Projects for promoting inclusion, integration and a sense of belonging, in relation to young refugees and displaced persons living in Europe. The involvement of such disadvantaged groups in learning mobilities and Solidarity Projects is a priority of the European Commission, as laid down in its European Youth Goals. Indeed, one of the main objectives of the European Solidarity Corps is to promote "social inclusion" of young people with fewer opportunities through providing them with opportunities to engage more fully in economic, social and cultural life. This paper draws on the concrete experience of working with

a hard-to-reach target group facing several key markers of disadvantage, namely young migrants from Mali, and is set in the framework of the Berlin-based Solidarity Project "Café Bamako".

In the previous decade, large sections of Europe's civil society have shown solidarity towards migrants in manifold ways, and in doing so have shown European society in its best light. This paper, however, seeks to go beyond an understanding of solidarity that mainly applies to the support and assistance provided by civil society *towards* migrants. Rather it encompasses and explores the ways in which young migrants can contribute to and enrich their new communities through actively engaging in solidarity themselves. From observations drawn from





the case study in question, it is possible to derive insights that are relevant to disadvantaged target groups more generally. As such, the conclusions drawn can be of relevance to both professionals in the youth field and those working at the policy making level.

# 2. The Target Group

The young people involved in the Café Bamako project include migrants from Mali and other West African countries who are living in Berlin. This is a hard-to-reach target group with several key markers of disadvantage. Firstly, the target group is characterised by high levels of illiteracy and low levels of formal schooling on arrival in Berlin. Only a quarter of adult Malians can read and write and this low level of educational attainment is reflected amongst the young people in the project (Wiedemann 2014). Secondly, they find themselves, for the most part, in a financially precarious situation. In economic terms, Mali is one of the least developed countries on earth. It's GDP is equivalent to that of North Korea's (The World Factbook 2020). Young Malians who have made it to Europe also face intense social pressure to send any money they make back home to help their families and communities. Malian migrants who are able to support their communities financially, bring prestige to themselves and their families, whereas those who don't manage this can be burdened by

shame and even exclusion from the community on their return (Wiedemann 2014). Thirdly, young West Africans living in Berlin all share in common the testing and often traumatic experience of their passage to Europe, transiting through conflict regions of the Sahara and venturing over the Mediterranean in crowded and unsafe boats. Mistreatment, exploitation and stigmatisation en route to Europe, often at the hands of criminal gangs and people smugglers, are a collective experience. Fourthly, young Malians tend to be socially isolated - an isolation that manifests itself twofold. Not only do they generally have little contact with Europeans, they also have few contacts with other West African communities. They face ghettoisation in communities that consist of young men of their own age group. This is in stark contrast to their previous experience of community in Mali, where intergenerational contact is a valued part of the culture and lived experience and where men and women live, work and socialise in close guarters. Also young Malians face racial discrimination and prejudice - including racial profiling - on a regular basis on account of their skin colour as well as their Muslim faith. As Amnesty International's report Living in insecurity: How Germany is failing victims of racist violence (Amnesty 2016) notes, racially motivated hate against refugees has risen dramatically since Angela Merkel's open border policy of 2015. At the same time there has been a lack of a comprehensive strategy to counteract hate crimes against refugees.



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# 3. Civil Society, Solidarity and Migration in Europe

The previous decade witnessed multiple crises which have posed a grave threat to Europe, its people and its institutions. We continue to feel the Financial Crisis (2007-2008) and its aftershocks in the politics of austerity. The fallout from COVID-19 can now be added to rising populism, xenophobia, terrorism, the "migration crisis", mass youth unemployment in southern Europe, and Brexit and the concomitant threat of the bloc's disintegration, all of which are unfolding against the backdrop of the existential threat presented by the climate crisis. And at this critical juncture, there is a widespread lack of trust in institutions to provide viable solutions. Indeed, the inability of the European Union and its member states to coordinate a joint response to common challenges has led a number of esteemed commentators and intellectuals to declare international solidarity to be "dead" (Lahusen and Grasso 2018).

However, in order to prevent the unravelling of the fabric of European society, solidarity would appear to be more important than ever.

If we shift our attention from the bickering between member states and instead focus on the engagement of civil society on the meso and micro levels, then there becomes more cause for optimism. The local and community level, as the recent SALTO publication 4Thought for Solidarity notes, is

highly relevant for the youth sector and it is here where youth work can support already existing and active community-focused solidarity initiatives and networks. Indeed, civil society's response to the "migrant crisis" of 2015 and its aftermath provides a striking example of localised citizen-driven solidarity engagement. According to a recent TransSOL survey, one third of respondents stated that they had directly engaged in a solidarity action for migrants, either through participating in a protest, donating money, boycotting a product or through membership of an organisation (Lahusen & Grasso 2018). The level of engagement and support for refugees varies across the union, but it is highest along the routes of migration and population centres where refugees live, and where the situation has a greater level of immediacy. Indeed, since the tragic ship-wrecks on the coast of Lampedusa in 2013 and the European Migration Crisis of 2015, solidarity towards refugees has been simultaneously one of the major mobilisers of civil society and issues of polarisation in Europe.

Germany's 'welcome culture' is a case in point. It evolved, on the one hand, in response to the perceived failings of the state and its institutions and on the other as an answer to rising right-wing and populist discourse (Lahusen and Grasso 2018). In fact we can see solidarity with migrants as being embedded in a present-day *Kulturkampf*. This is neatly reflected in German attitudes surrounding questions of financial solidarity towards migrants, which are considerably more favourable than



those of the EU as a whole. According to TransSOL, 47% of Germans are supportive of their government offering financial support to the EU to help refugees, while 29% oppose. But when it comes to entrenched opinion, the results point to polarisation: of those who strongly support and strongly oppose, the numbers are 12% respectively (Lahusen and Grasso 2018).

Across the continent, solidarity towards migrants manifests itself in many and varied ways. One of the most spectacular, daring and newsworthy is provided by the crews of Seawatch, who rescue migrants caught adrift in the Mediterranean. It is their actions that can be interpreted as a damning indictment of an EU border policy that too often leaves the most vulnerable to perish. In Berlin, from where this paper is being written, one does not have to look hard to find public support for such initiatives. Banners demanding safe harbours and invoking our institutions to "leave no one behind", adorn buildings across the city in an expression of solidarity towards migrants who risk their lives in a desperate attempt to cross from North Africa. Other examples of solidarity include the 'Refugees Welcome' initiative, where rooms in

shared-flatsareprovided to house displaced persons. This is so that they do not have to rely on the over-crowded and desolate conditions, characteristic of many of the refugee camps. Church groups, in addition to offering basic medical services for those without the necessary papers, are expanding their remit to offer shelter and language courses for migrants. Benefit concerts organised by musicians and event spaces, as well as crowdfunding initiatives all belong to the landscape of solidarity. Indeed, in light of the engagement of individuals, civil society organisations and social movements, there is much evidence to suggest that solidarity in Europe is far from dead and is in fact flourishing.

Solidarity towards migrants is motivated by many factors. Among these is the desire to ensure basic human rights, to guarantee a level of human dignity and to express a sense of common humanity. "The preparedness of people to become actively involved in solidarity initiatives", as the SOLIDUS report on inter- and intragroup solidarity puts it, "appears to be based in humanitarian values, such as justice, fairness and egalitarianism" (Hopman et al 2017. p41). But while the well-being of others often serves as the motivation for solidarity, the benefits can extend beyond recipients of the solidarity action to the initiators themselves. Even if reciprocity is not a goal of solidarity, it can and often does manifest itself in a sense of empowerment or community that follows from civil society engagement.



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An obvious example of mutual reward can be found in volunteering. Volunteering projects that are managed well are a great way to provide young people with the opportunity to engage on a path of personal development and the acquisition of valuable skills and experiences as a result of their engagement in helping others. It is for this reason, that a strategic objective of the European Solidarity Corps is to increase the participation of young people with fewer opportunities in volunteering projects – such as the target group being discussed in this paper. Participation in a volunteering project, in which they serve as a representative of their host country, clearly has a considerable potential for creating a sense of belonging and place for young people who have been displaced. Moreover, through their active engagement, volunteers with refugee backgrounds help to counter the populist narrative that paints them as a burden. It also counters the perception that frames them as victims, allowing them to showcase their talents and the positive contribution they can make through engaging in solidarity actions directed towards others.

However, participation in international volunteering in Europe is skewed towards participants from more privileged backgrounds (Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). For a target group such as the young Malians in Berlin, or young refugees more generally, there are a number of barriers in place. Firstly, there is often a lack of awareness amongst the

young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and refugees in particular, of the opportunities available. In many cases, the civil society support groups, such as Church associations or informal groups based around shared apartments or music and cultural venues, are not connected with or operating within the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps frames. Secondly, full time volunteering is often not feasible for young refugees. This is because some are required to attend mandatory language courses as a condition of being granted (temporary) residency, while others find themselves in apprenticeships and training. Those who are not in the above categories often lack the necessary documents and paperwork to qualify for such opportunities. The classic example is the young Malian who officially is registered in Italy, but has made his way to Germany in the hope of a better future, only to find himself in a bureaucratically enforced stasis. A third important factor to consider is restricted mobility. Many refugees, on arriving at a particular destination in an urban centre, do not feel confident about leaving the city. To most young Malians we have encountered, Europe consists of Lampedusa, Milan and Berlin - points of reference linked by arduous journeys best forgotten. Once in Germany, it is often hard to persuade a young Malian that it could be potentially advantageous for them to leave their long-desired destination to participate in a volunteering programme in another country.

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For these reasons, the European Solidarity Corps' 'Solidarity Projects' in addition to providing incountry volunteering opportunities, present a more promising framework for promoting social inclusion amongst marginalised target groups such as refugees and migrants. Firstly, it does not require a full-time commitment from participants, and activities can be organised to fit in with their existing schedules. Secondly, activities can take place in the communities, towns or cities in which they are based, again reducing a potential barrier to participation. The projects themselves can be dovetailed to the specific interests and talents of the group. In the next section, we will take a closer look at one specific Solidarity Project and the achievement it has brought as well as challenges it has faced.

# 4. Case Study: Café Bamako

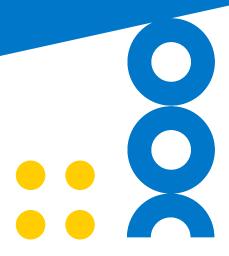
<u>Café Bamako</u> is a new Berlin-based initiative that is currently being supported in the framework of a European Solidarity Corps, Solidarity Project. The project is mentored and supported by <u>Lernlabor</u>, a Berlin-based social business. The idea for creating the project was suggested by Moussa Bagayoko, one of the active members of our organisation, who has for many years been working as a mentor to young Malians in Berlin in an informal capacity. Moussa is from Mali himself, and is well respected by the young people from the Malian community. Although he has no formal education, he has

gained experience through non-formal learning and international exchange programmes. He has participated in over 10 international projects and training courses in the last four years. Moussa not only provided the inspiration but also a needs analysis of the target group, and together we worked with him to develop a concept for the project in the frame of a local Solidarity Project.

Café Bamako seeks to promote West African culture and to combat and challenge negative stereotypes centring on young black men in the city's public spaces. Bamako is the capital of Mali, and the project was originally conceived as a means to promote and showcase Malian culture as well as the positive role young Malians can play in their local communities here in Berlin. However, over the course of the project the remit has expanded to incorporate the broader West African cultural area and the West African community in Berlin as a whole. The young people involved are motivated by their desire to engage constructively with issues that affect their local communities. At the same time they want to gain experience in project management and civic engagement through displaying solidarity with marginalised West Africans in Berlin. Here we have a concrete example of altruistic motivations leading to concrete learning experiences and benefits for the group initiating the solidarity action. The group and the wider supporters of the initiative are composed of members of Berlin's Malian and West African community, German and other EU citizens, as well as young



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people from non-EU countries including the Russian Federation and the USA. It currently consists of a core group numbering around half a dozen people and an additional dozen wider supporters. Interestingly, and relevant to the understanding of levels of solidarity as expressed in 4Thought for Solidarity, the group and its wider supporters emerged organically from existing solidarity networks at the local level. This can be traced back to young malians being housed in shared apartments in Berlin as a result the local Refugees Welcome initiative.

### **4.2 Project Aims**

The project has identified two specific issues that negatively impact young West Africans in Berlin. Firstly, in the last decade, the West African community in Berlin has grown considerably and there is next to no infrastructure for the West African diaspora in Berlin. In contrast to other communities, such as the Turkish or Lebanese for example, which are well established in the city and include many professionals, entrepreneurs, or small-business owners, the Malian diaspora has fewer resources. There is no Malian cafe in the city where the community (which consists primarily of young men, often with little formal schooling and whose status in Germany is unstable or tenuous) can meet. One of the main places for these young men to meet

up are betting shops, where they can watch live sports for free – but where they risk getting drawn into gambling. Event locations – such as Yaam – where African music concerts and events take place can be prohibitively expensive. The events take place late at night in an alcohol-fuelled 'party' atmosphere, which can also be off-putting for Muslim West Africans. At the same time, these young West Africans, often from rural communities, have a rich knowledge of West African culture – including music, cooking and dance – which appeals to young Europeans. This has the potential to serve as a bridge between their home countries and the new communities in which they now live.

The second issue that the Café Bamako project engages with is the widespread negative stereotypes surrounding young black men in Berlin's public parks and in public spaces. Due to genuine issues, such as the prevalent level of petty drug-dealing in many inner city parks, there is a tendency for young Africans in Berlin and black men in general to be stigmatised and for them to be presumed to be drug dealers. Indeed, as the Berlin-based artist Scott Holmquist showed in his exhibition "Other Homelands: Origins and Migration Routes of Berlin Park Drug Sellers", the tabloid press has whipped up a veritable moral panic in which the park dealers emerge as objects of societal hate – a process which serves to legitimise racism (Holmquest 2017). As a result of this, a lot of young West Africans tend to avoid meeting up in public parks for fear that they will be approached by drug addicts



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or harassed by the police. Given that the community has so few resources at hand, especially in terms of meeting places, it is all the more important that the young people of West African origin should be able to stake their rightful claim to public spaces. By organising cultural events in public spaces in the city, such as parks, the participants in the European Solidarity Corps, Solidarity Project are seeking to display solidarity through challenging the negative and racist stereotypes that are attached to young black people in public spaces through their positive interventions.

### **4.3 Project Achievements**

Since June 2020 the project team has organised a series of events that have raised awareness about these core issues and which have promoted the visibility of West African culture in Berlin. The first event, on June 7th, was held at the Haus der Statistik. Café Bamako provided dance workshops and traditional West African drumming performances to over 50 participants, including local residents of the neighbouring apartment blocs. On June 20th the project was invited to participate in the Haus der Statistik's Kick-Off Event where it was one of over 20 civic initiatives present. On the 5th September the project created its first promotional video at the Panafrican festival in Berlin. This was done in collaboration with graduates of the School of Audio Engineering Institute and the "Heart Beats of Africa", a group of professional musicians from Senegal and Gambia. The project has since built on these initial successes and offers a series

of workshops that include West African drumming, dancing and cooking, as well as further events in public spaces.

In December 2020, members of the initiative also took part in a German-Ukrainian hybrid collaborative art project that performed live in Berlin's Studio dB and in Poltava in the Ukraine. Through its participation in "a:pART: Berlin-Poltava", the initiative made a conscious step to move beyond activities that might reinforce stereotypes about the "uniqueness" of traditional African culture and instead embed West African artistic expression in cutting-edge contemporary international artistic collaboration. Through engaging in cultural exchanges with artists from the Ukraine, moreover, Café Bamako took a step towards shifting the emphasis from bringing together the cultures of the global "north" and "south" by exploring cultural similarities – of which there proved to be many. This was evident to see in the "Tree of Life", which resulted from the collaboration with the Ukrainian artist Roxolana Dudka. The performance not only allowed Café Bamako members to gain valuable experience and new professional connections, but also served as proof that West Africa and Ukraine are not necessarily worlds apart, as many might think.

Through organising and holding events and through collaborating with local social business and additional stakeholders, the initiative has managed to create new personal connections



between young West Africans and locals. An example of this was an event the initiative helped to organise for the co-working space Officina, this resulted in a number of follow-up invitations from the staff members who were present. They were able to set up direct lines of communication between young West Africans involved in the project and Berliners with considerable cultural and social capital. What this has led to is the creation of an informal network whose raison d'être is not to provide assistance to participants in the project but a space where mutual help and solidarity organically develops to the benefit of the Malian and wider West African community. Through engaging themselves in solidarity on behalf of others, the participants reap the rewards of solidarity in return. This solidarity within the project, between its participants and supporters, manifests itself in various ways that foster social inclusion in everyday life. This can range from simple help with filling out forms and paperwork, to help with finding housing or rooms in shared flats, to letters of reference or recommendations to employers, and to legal support. As a direct consequence of this intra-group solidarity one of the project participants, a young man from Mali, has managed to secure a full-time job in a logistics company, with full social security coverage and good working conditions. Through involvement in the Solidarity Project, another participant was able to provide the Immigration Office with documentation of his social and civic engagement in order to support his application for permanent residency. A further

member of the initiative, who had resided in the city for several years without a fixed abode, now has a stable tenancy in a shared apartment – again as a direct result of contacts made through his participation in this initiative. These personal connections with locals who can engage and advocate on their behalf is a valuable tangible consequence of participation in the Café Bamako project.

The lack of social capital and access to support networks is one of the key markers of disadvantage faced by young West Africans living in Berlin. In our experience, many of these young men, even after several years' residency, have managed to only forge few contacts beyond that of their immediate group. To put it in other words, prior to taking part in Solidarity Projects, most of the young Malian men we have encountered spent most of their time with other young Malians. This ghettoisation is a clear barrier to social inclusion, and so by engaging in Solidarity Projects, as the example of Café Bamako shows, the young people are presented with an opportunity to break this cycle. Through regular meetings, events and also through being offered the possibilities to participate in Lernlabor's wider educational offerings, the initiative has helped to foster mutual support networks between West Africans and locals on both a personal and institutional level. In the case of the Café Bamako project, it has resulted not only in our Malian participants being integrated more into 'European' networks, it has also led to their integration into the wider West African community in Berlin. This is because the



project includes supporters, mentors and cooperation partners from Senegal and Gambia, some of whom act as role models to our young Malian participants. The importance of this unexpected but positive benefit should not be overlooked. The Gambian and Senegalese stakeholders bring with them their own networks, they are already relatively well established within the city's cultural and music scene. They also have their own entrepreneurial projects – such as workshops and courses – which serve as examples of the possibilities available.

### 4.4 Challenges

While the European Solidarity Corps Solidarity Projects present a promising framework for fostering social inclusion, as the experience of our case study indicates, the format also presents challenges. These challenges started to present themselves at the beginning of the project in the very act of registering the participants. This process would be straightforward for most, however, it presented considerable difficulties for the target group of young Malians. A large proportion of this target group do not own a computer and most have only limited capacities to read and write. In fact, none of our Malian participants were able to register on their own, the only way we could ensure their registration was by sitting down with them in front of a computer and assisting them fully with the registration process. This task was

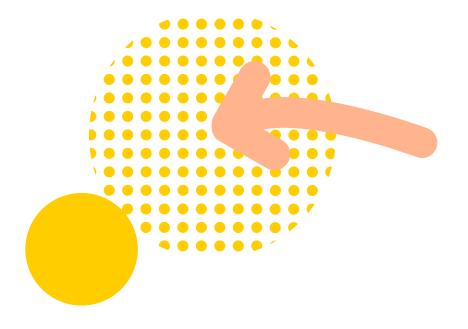
organised by Lernlabor, who applied for the project and provided mentors. In the context of the COVID restrictions, it has proved to be an even more challenging process. This in fact prevented a number of potential participants from signing up to the initiative, though they are actively involved in the activities. It would seem, in hindsight, that the registration process favours those who are computer literate and actually serves to exclude or deter participants from disadvantaged backgrounds. This has also been an experience shared by our partners who are working with similarly disadvantaged young people.

The Covid-19 lockdown procedures have posed a further challenge for the initiative. Due to the low level of IT skills of some of the project's participants, a switch to online activities has proved to be difficult to manage. Setting up Zoom accounts for all participants, for instance, requires additional initial mentoring of a one-on-one nature. As online activities become an ever more important feature of Solidarity Projects, we have drawn the conclusion that basic IT training at the beginning of any such future initiative is hugely important. It would empower participants with fewer opportunities to more fully maintain their levels of engagement throughout the project cycle.

# 5. Conclusion

Solidarity Projects provide promising opportunities, within the framework of the European Solidarity Corps, for empowering young people with fewer opportunities to participate more fully in economic, social and cultural life. The structure of the programme allows for the implementation of local projects that do not require a full-time commitment. It is well suited to the needs of target groups such as migrants and young refugees, as this paper has highlighted in reference to the young Malians involved in the Berlin-based Café Bamako project. Participation in Solidarity Projects presents a promising pathway to social inclusion, as they promote engagement with issues that are relevant to disadvantaged young people's local

communities and their everyday lives. Solidarity Projects provide the opportunity for young people to engage with issues that affect them and their communities at the local level. This is the level at which there is much potential to not only engage young participants but provide the scope for tangible impact and improvements. At this critical juncture in Europe's history, the case for fostering solidarity towards the most disadvantaged individuals and communities is compelling. So too is the potential for these very individuals and communities to make a positive contribution to the tapestry of our social fabric. But only if they are empowered to become active citizens through engaging in initiatives that benefit themselves, their communities and beyond.





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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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