Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has unearthed in very tangible ways the devastating consequences of unequal societies: the virus may infect anyone, in spite of their socio-economic background, but those who are able to work from home, rely on well-funded public healthcare systems, can have their kids attending well-functioning online classes and live in communities with a rooted sense of solidarity can cope better with it.

Along with social injustice, the outbreak has in fact unveiled the extraordinary social innovation that nests in progressive Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

Our members work closely with the communities they support on a daily basis, and the social distancing imposed to prevent a further spread of Coronavirus has heavily affected their possibility to work. Yet it hasn’t stopped them.

Thanks to their community-based knowledge and expertise, our members were reacting impressively promptly to the crisis, transforming and adapting their regular activities to social distancing so as to put in motion material and immaterial solidarity actions by directly supporting their communities. They did so by providing assistance to the ones hit the hardest, including workers, and the most vulnereables, like migrants, as well as by providing lifelong learning activities in innovative ways and helping to overcome the sense of isolation stemming from social distancing by organising cultural and entertainment activities for people of all ages and with different interests.

The swift adaptation to a new social environment of our members is supporting small as well as large communities to cope with the sense of isolation, anguish for the future and anxiety that so many are currently experiencing by offering new ways for social inclusion.

This briefing note reports the actions of solidarity organised by our members during the ongoing social emergency. We publish it to inspire policy-makers, and all citizens, to envision the society we aspire to live in after the pandemic.

We publish it also to showcase that solidarity is what keeps communities bound together through the hardest times and that it’s what makes communities thrive at all times. Different post-Coronavirus scenarios have been published by think tanks and independent thinkers across the globe. We believe that learning the lesson from the crisis must include building upon the flourishing social innovation that lies in our communities and that has been organised by progressive Civil Society Organisations.

SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation members have undertaken very different initiatives to support communities during these difficult times: we report about
innovative ways to ignite social participation, from ensuring that information would reach all and providing direct help to the vulnerable ones to creating new forms of cultural entertainment to encourage people to stay at home and do it meaningfully. They managed to transfer socially engaging activities online, helping people to find resilience in the strength of their communities as well as providing lifelong learning activities online. Not least, this note includes a section for our members who are more visibly on the frontline for protecting workers: Trade Unions are essential in this phase for communities to overcome the crisis in the most sustainable way.

All these efforts are happening against a backdrop of shrinking civic space and weakened support for Civil Society Organisations across Europe and worldwide, as noted also by the LIBE Committee, that called for adequate funding to be allocated for CSOs upholding democratic and funding values of the EU in the 2021 budget. The social innovation that our members are sparking and the efforts behind it should not be forgotten but rather pinned as examples to be followed and sustained the day after the end of the crisis: for the society we want to live in is just and our members are working exactly to advance social justice, across all communities.

Innovating the ways to ignite social participation: best practices for social solidarity in times of social distancing

Social support, solidarity and the chance to participate in vibrant communities is regarded as essential for human beings. However, during the unusual times of social distancing, there is a wake-up call to realise that such a thing is not to be taken for granted. There is a newfound appreciation for the importance of social solidarity for everyone’s well-being. In these moments, regular support avenues such as local, national and European CSOs represent a needed breath of fresh air, and they have been exceptional in adapting their work. Just as everyone else, the CSOs’ staff members must respect social distancing. Their activities are disrupted, postponed or cancelled and the pressure of delivering work that needs human contact is taking a toll. However, they demonstrated a high level of social innovation and an impressive commitment to aid people in these isolated times.

The best practices presented below point towards a wide range of activities, that extend from simple services of spreading information regarding the impact of the virus and safety guidelines, to sharing information about where various services can be accessed by people to meet their needs, to keeping people engaged with various daily tasks, to organising a wide variety of cultural events that mimic so closely life outside of quarantine and to the provision of lifelong learning activities. Depending on the resources that people have and depending on the CSOs target groups, they have either provided solidarity online or found inventive ways to deliver it offline.

Information transmission

Not only have SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation members shared information on public health messages, but they have ensured that it reaches everyone. Volunteering Matters, in the UK, has made use of the volunteers normally working in the EU VOICE project to translate safety guidelines in 20 different languages to ensure that those who do not have English as a first language also benefit from all the needed advice. Moreover, there are difficulties in sifting through all messages within the manic reporting around COVID-19. As a result, fake news can proliferate, but Open Democracy has put together a ‘Coronavirus disinformation test’ to ensure
that people do not promote misinformation related to COVID-19, which, in this current situation, can be criminal. CIVICUS has been sharing vast reserves of information for CSOs but also for communities on how to cope with COVID-19 from different perspectives. They have been advertising the tech tools made available by various companies to facilitate teleworking, they have provided a guide for social activism through phones, guides on how activists and organisers had to adapt their work. Moreover, CIVICUS advertises the outpour of statements and messages coming from the civil society in solidarity with the COVID-19 situation, while providing an overview of the measures taken in different countries in face of the crisis, clearly highlighting areas where human and social rights are violated under the guise of necessity to combat the crisis.

On the ground assistance for the most vulnerable

In an effort to provide contact and to meet isolated people’ demands, Volunteering Matters, in the UK, redeployed its volunteers, who were ensuring that the elderly community was driven from their home to various social activities, to do the shopping for them. These volunteers are also available on various phone lines to talk with the isolated elderly community and provide much needed support. Using telephones, Volunteering Matters is also creating ‘telephone reminisce’ groups and running activities such as quizzes via them, to keep the same activities available for their target groups. Solidarité Laïque has also been actively working to ensure that the five educational centres that they support have the resources to provide shelter for children, people with disabilities and staff members in a responsible way during the crisis. They actively work with African partners to find solutions for the lack of resuscitation beds or for water scarcity in this crisis, continuing to assist the most disadvantaged who are hit the hardest. Similar shows of solidarity come from La Ligue de l’Enseignement which uses its holiday centres to welcome homeless people and migrants, protecting those who do not have a shelter at a time when everyone is urged to stay in-doors. President Emmanuel Macron has been visiting such centres around Paris to show appreciation for their important work. These organisations actively ensure that the most disadvantaged are protected.

MON ALSH À LA MAISON : QUAND LE CENTRE DE LOISIRS VIENT AUX PARENTS

Vous ne pouvez pas vous rendre au centre de loisirs ?

Sharing is caring

To keep morale high and people active, various organisations are providing daily or weekly challenges for people to meet. These can be aimed either at health and well-being, or at lifelong learning, or simply to engage people in common activities. The Willi Eichler Foundation, in Germany, has run a stayathome challenge on Facebook to share various books, podcasts, opinion pieces, films linked to culture or history, contributing to a process of informal lifelong learning. CEMEA Belgium has launched its ‘Bubble of Air’ campaign also on Facebook, providing, similarly, cultural and creative products for people to consume together and discuss about it. Through its partnerships with the Sports Union for Primary Education (USEP), La Ligue de l’Enseignement shares resources for daily 30 minutes of physical activities to be done in one’s home, to
maintain the morale and health of the communities.

From offline to online: best practices transferring physical social engagement to the virtual space

Innovation for social solidarity can occur as seen so far, but it is clear that it will rely a great deal on digital tools as well. Many SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation members, as well as CSOs around the world, have migrated a great amount of their work in the virtual space. It is clear that closures of physical offices pushed many to quickly adapt to teleworking, using various tools to organise meetings, conferences, webinars remotely. This clearly required preparation, and La Ligue and Volunteering Matters have created structured guidelines and ran training online to protect their staff members during these times of crisis but also to ensure that they can still perform activities.

Beyond the actual operations of CSOs, which have successfully moved online, they have been evaluating which projects can be transferred online for continuity and in what way. Pour la Solidarité, in Belgium, is running a project titled MentorU, which aims at alleviating the acute unemployment issue in Wallonia. They pair jobseekers with employees, entrepreneurs or self-employed to assist them in their journey of finding employment. The process is complex, canvassing the business environment, training mentors, selecting mentees, pairing them and then monitoring and evaluating their interactions. This relevant project was in danger of being put on hold during COVID-19, hitting those disadvantaged that could not find employment, placing them in a precarious position for the crisis’ aftermath. However, Pour la Solidarité successfully transferred the mentor-mentee interactions online, by encouraging them to meet virtually and send constant reports of their interactions. Beyond continuing the project, this interaction proves to be invaluable at a time when people yearn for human contact.

Similarly, La Ligue has been considering the impact that COVID-19 has on people who lack digital skills to engage in various activities or to perform teleworking. Therefore, they have set up the Digital Solidarity platform to provide assistance related to digital tools for users that might be socially excluded due to the complexity of the task at hand. However, La Ligue is aware that even access to such informative platforms can prove to be too difficult and, therefore, is using its volunteers to run phone lines from where people can get advice on basic digital tasks. The transition to the online environment cannot be done without support to those who lacked access to learning about digitalisation.

CSOs have proven to be ahead of the curve in terms of data protection as well. At a time when the tech giants are providing free access to premium subscriptions for their services, people tend to forget about the debate surrounding data privacy and about how much information about themselves they share by using such tools. Therefore, CEMEA France has provided access to free software digital tools and compiled a guide on how to access them. In this way, they provide the needed tools for performing in the digital reality but mitigating the impact that this has on the personal data that people share.

ARCI, in Italy, has organised a giant campaign to create an entire web of online social activities replicating many of the cultural activities that people were used to. The Viral Resistance campaign is tremendous in scope, showing exceptional innovation on ARCI’s side in moving so many of its activities to the virtual realm, and is much needed given the dire situation in which Italy finds itself during this pandemic.
The web programming against loneliness, as it is branded, compiles a list of activities that people can take part in while on lockdown. Many are directly run by ARCI local clubs or the clubs support some partners in running them. Readings and live concerts are organised and streamed digitally for people, while musicians, singers, poets, writers, and other artists are having a platform to disseminate their work. Radio shows and webTVs are set up to present programmes on various themes on which the local clubs were normally working on. Culture recreation and political and social promotion is the focus of these activities, in an effort for ARCI to remain connected to its target audience. Online stories, readings and other playful activities for children are also organised by various local clubs and other partners. Online courses for foreign languages, yoga, cooking and film history and culture are also provided within the ambit of the campaign. The sheer scope of activities that moved completely online is impressive, and ARCI has proven to be a great innovator in the way it has implemented these online activities, but also it has shown social solidarity at a time when Italian communities are most in need for.

The solidarity of our members also extends to funding CSOs and emergency workers in these times of crisis, to ensure, firstly, that they can continue their timely work to assist people in need that are affected by COVID-19 and, secondly, especially for CSOs, to ensure that they can survive the COVID-19 aftermath and continue their operations. SOLIDAR, SOLIDAR Foundation and their members urge anyone who is willing to donate for this highly relevant work to follow the below weblinks:

- [ARCI crowdfunding campaign to support its local clubs for their sustainable operations post-COVID-19](#)
- [Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund’s donation campaign for emergency workers](#)

Moreover, in identifying the situation on the ground, IRIS Network has launched a questionnaire for CSOs in the Western Balkans to assess the needs of social services who are stretched thin by the crisis. SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation urge all CSOs from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia to respond to IRIS’s survey, providing a better picture of the situation for a better targeted response.

**Best practices from virtual Lifelong learning activities**

The online transition implicitly meant an opportunity for e-learning to develop. SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation members provide non-formal and informal education and have had to adapt to the digital transition for this during the COVID-19 pandemic. The education that they provide has expanded from preschoolers until adults, covering the entire lifelong learning spectrum. The need for learning is essential as people are isolated and frightened about how their life is placed on hold by the virus. MKC, in the Czech Republic, provided access to methodological
materials developed through their wide variety of projects for parents to engage in home-schooling. This support is invaluable as children need to be reassured and have to have a routine while continuing their educational process. Similarly, La Liga’s early childhood education centres in Extremadura have been creating weekly videos of the educators so that children aged 0-3 can get their needed contact in times of isolation. Children must know that the educators have not disappeared from their lives, and the use of digital tools ensures the continuation of education.

For undergraduate students preparing to join the fields of pre-school, primary or social education, La Liga Española de la educación is running the ‘Aulas con sabor a tierra’ teaching process. The aim is to assist with the inclusion of global citizenship education in the curriculum by means of gardening. The aim is to transfer this experiential methodology into the classrooms once the undergraduates move into employment. However, COVID-19 has provided barriers to the implementation of the project’s second edition. Online courses were set up, but beyond this, advice was offered for learners to use their own seed beds or gardens to continue with the gardening. The online classes reflect a tremendous creative and innovative online environment which proves how inventive an organisation like La Liga can be in its efforts to support learners.

La Ligue is supporting the initiative of French television channel France 4 to broadcast a daily one-hour educational programme dedicated to primary school pupils. This is a way to continue school education in bulk, as, on average, 1 million viewers tune in to watch the educational show.

Protecting the working class

As COVID-19 unveils the consequences of unequal societies, social injustice is emerging in very tangible ways, hitting the hardest those with the weakest social protection to back them up against the impossibility to work and generate income.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has released in mid-March a preliminary assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the world of work that provides a clear picture of the scar that is about to mark workers’ well-being. Beyond the urgent concerns about the health of workers and their families, ILO identifies three key dimensions of the subsequent far-reaching shocks rising from the pandemic:

- The quantity of jobs (both unemployment and underemployment);
- The quality of work (e.g. wages and access to social protection); and
- Effects on specific groups who are more vulnerable to adverse labour market outcomes.

Countries with fiscal leverage, strong welfare systems and rooted culture of tripartite social dialogue come to the fight against COVID-19 better equipped than the others. But in every country concerned, combating the impact of the pandemic requires massive fiscal stimulus, to reach beyond banks and beyond their clients: to reach all citizens now faced with dire financial conditions, especially those orbiting outside the social policies. This requires the welfare system to be made genuinely universal: the culture underpinning
the vast majority of welfare systems in Europe, especially in terms of access to social policies, is still anchored in the 20th century. Nonetheless, many atypical forms of work have become the norm for an increasing number of people, who are de facto excluded by welfare systems designed for traditional understandings of employment and who are now potentially excluded by the financial backup and fiscal stimulus that governments are deploying. For the welfare systems to uphold their societal mission, this long-standing debate must now come to terms with reality.

To do so, it is necessary to include the voice of all workers in the debate. For societies to be as cohesive as they need to overcome the crisis, they must be inclusive too. This is why the role of Trade Unions in this phase is so crucial and why overcoming the shock requires entrusting the social dialogue with the powers to design the plan for supporting workers and their families now as well as in the aftermath of the outbreak. “Building confidence through trust and dialogue is crucial in making policy measures effective. Especially in times of heightened social tension and a lack of trust in institutions, strengthened respect for, and reliance on mechanisms of social dialogue, creates a strong basis for building the commitment of employers and workers to joint action with governments. Enterprise-level social dialogue is also crucial”.

Citizens’ trust and support to the democratic institutions, the vibrancy of the civic space and the strength of trade unions are the necessary basis for entire communities to be able to overcome the shock with no societal deep crisis.

A historic moment for Trade Unions

Trade Unions are on the frontline for ensuring adequate social protection for all workers. SOLIDAR was originally established in 1948 as International Workers’ Aid to encourage international cooperation between social aid organisations connected to the labour movement. In times when half of the world population lives in lockdown, this original intuition resonates profoundly with the current events: it is essential, now more than ever, for progressive NGOs and Trade Unions to come together and echo each others’ work which is supporting in various, but equally essential ways, communities across Europe.

Trade Unions, where possible thanks to a well-established social dialogue, are concluding agreements with employers and Governments to put in place measures and resources to keep workers safe, to protect their jobs and incomes during the coronavirus crisis no matter what their job, occupation or employment relationship. Such ‘social dialogue’ agreements have the potential to address the real problems faced by workers and companies. COVID-19 is making it clear for all that trusting the social dialogue and all its actors is key to a good governance of societal changes and their regulation.

Some measures were negotiated for responding to immediate needs, such as all those related to the safety of workers. In one of the countries so far hit the hardest in Europe - Italy, the three confederal Unions helped to obtain the teleworking options as well as the sanitization of workplaces, the closure of the economic activities providing non-essential services, the restriction of the opening hours as well as the respect of

safety distances for the providers of essential services. In Belgium, as well as in Italy, Trade Unions obtained teleworking to be compulsory for all “non-essential” organisations and, where teleworking was not possible, for safe distance to be guaranteed between workers, and customers. Unions also obtained increased labour inspections to ensure that safety measures are being respected and urged the European Commission to make sure that social dialogue is not bypassed during the Covid-19 emergency, as it was the case in Poland.

Along with the protection of workers’ health, Unions are fighting also for the protection of workers’ income. A struggle of which the results have far-reaching impacts on workers’ well-being, stretching to the long-term in the aftermath of the crisis. In Belgium, FGTB has obtained an increase from 65% to 70% of the upper end of the salary that serves as a basis for the, extended, temporary unemployment benefits due to economic constraints.

Our partners ETUC and ETUI have taken several initiatives at EU level to support unions and workers in dealing with the crisis. They created the COVID-19 Watch, which collects useful materials for national trade unions as well as for policy makers to reflect on the response to the crisis, including briefing notes providing critical information on the impacts of COVID-19 on labour markets, workers and citizens across Europe. The Watch is regularly updated to capture every development and provides contextualization and concrete proposals for each situation, from Short Time Work Measures Across Europe to the Letter to the Croatian Government on suspension of labour and social rights.

Unions are safeguarding workers’ health also by innovating their practices of solidarity at times of social distancing. As it is often the case, youth branches are the first ones sparking innovative ideas. It is the case for ETUC as well: ETUC Youth has launched the Trade Union Therapy, which consists of online sessions for overcoming lockdown with useful content, such as a discussion on what COVID-19 tells us about our society.

The great responsiveness of all CSOs, including Unions, to the crisis and the innovative practices of solidarity promptly deployed showed to all that a democratic society cannot be resilient and sustainable without a vibrant civic space. This will be the truer the day after the crisis: ensuring the adoption of meaningful ways for the active participation of CSOs to the governance of the phase that will come after the crisis is essential for communities to overcome their profound distress in inclusive and democratic ways.

Conclusions

Civil Society Organisations have demonstrated their outstanding resilience by swiftly adapting their work, based on close contact with their communities, to the social distancing measures adopted to prevent a further spread of COVID-19. Their actions have been innovative in the ways they are performed as well as in the content that is
proposed, and by re-envisioning social connections and the value of social bonds.

The work of CSOs across Europe reveals the important role that they have in the provision of lifelong learning, and underlie the fact that many learning processes continued informally in this time of lockdown. Recognition of skills obtained in informal contexts becomes more visible in these times, and it must join the political agenda in the times following this unprecedented crisis. However, for this to be achieved, there needs to be an acknowledgement that much of the work done in this lockdown time was hampered by the tremendous inequalities existent in our societies. The great innovative work or lifelong learning opportunities that our members have provided have not reached all, while many efforts from our members, as can be seen from our Migration and COVID-19 Briefing Note, focused on humanitarian assistance in these times. Inequality gaps must be addressed and social investment must be made a priority when launching the post-COVID-19 recovery.

The fundamental role that CSOs have played in supporting communities across Europe during this unprecedented crisis must be acknowledged in the aftermath of the crisis as well. The flourishing social innovation that they are releasing doesn’t mean that CSOs won’t be affected, also economically, by the backlash of the crisis. For this reason, SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation will monitor and advocate for the public aid that will be made available to be accessible in transparent ways for CSOs too, along with workers, households and companies.

Yet our communities will need more than direct material aids to overcome this crisis. Inclusive and democratic decision-making process and governance will be key for communities to establish new foundations for their cohesion. The social dialogue won’t complete its function the day after the prevention measures will be lifted: Trade Unions will have to be actively included in designing the strategies to lift the prevention measures as well as the policies to ignite sustainable development in the economy and in the society as a whole as it will emerge after the trauma of the pandemic.

All CSOs will have to be included in the multistakeholder governance that must emerge as a response to the scar that the virus is leaving on our societies. Acting at different levels and with their respective expertises, CSOs can support the better their communities the more their voice is part of the decision-making process. From the local to the European level, SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation will follow closely the policies that will be adopted and will support our members at making their voice heard.