



Young Europeans' Forum 2019 "Building Bridges for Social Cohesion"

Notes and Recommendations

From June 25 to 27, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and Projet Aladin, in cooperation with UNESCO, hosted the Young Europeans' Forum on "Building Bridges for social cohesion" in Berlin. 100 young committed people from 24 European countries exchanged views on how to strengthen social cohesion in diverse societies. In keeping with the motto "learn – connect – transfer" they shared ideas, experiences and good practices, worked together on solutions and discussed with activists, experts and politicians how a peaceful, solidarity-based and democratic living together can be shaped/achieved

Welcome and Introduction: Social cohesion – Challenges and concept

In many European societies, social cohesion is challenged by megatrends, such as globalization, digitalization, growing inequality, and migration. In addition – or in part as a consequence of those megatrends – our living together is confronted with increasing cultural diversity, a greater plurality of values and lifestyles, as well as a rise in populism, polarization and a loss of confidence in democracy. Recognizing that many European countries face these challenges, a number of important questions arise: What holds societies together? What must we do today so that this cohesiveness will remain present in the future? How can we foster social cohesion?

How important these questions are, can be seen in what social cohesion means. Three aspects characterize a cohesive community:

1. Connectedness

People feel strongly connected to their community and identify with it. They have confidence in the social and political institutions and they believe that they are being treated fairly.

2. Social relations

People in cohesive societies have strong, resilient social networks. They trust each other and they accept people with different values and lifestyles as equals.

3. Focus on the common good

People feel responsible for others and are willing to help them. They take responsibility for the community and the vulnerable, through commitment and solidarity. Furthermore, people abide by the fundamental rules of society and they participate in social and political life.

This concept shows: First, social cohesion is desirable. It contributes to making a society worth living in and fit for the future. Second, there are many ways to promote social cohesion and it is worth to exchange ideas, experiences and good practice and support each other in this effort.

Key Note: Challenges and opportunities for social cohesion

In his keynote address, Hanno Burmester highlighted several key thoughts on social cohesion and on how to strengthen it:

- We must shape social cohesion actively and we can do that best in our everyday lives, through the way in which we encounter and interact with each other.
- The quality of social relationships is a core of social cohesion. Therefore, we must build trusting, resilient and appreciative social relationships. In order to promote such relationships, we need spaces for encounter and dialogue. Politics and civil society should create such spaces and shape the dialogue between different groups and people. Each individual can and should also build and shape social relationships in their respective communities
- The abilities of engaging in dialogue, showing empathy and changing perspectives are important skills for promoting and “living” social cohesion. Empowerment is therefore an important approach to help people live a cohesive life together.

Workshops: How do we foster social cohesion? – Our own projects

Inspired by the key note, the participants discussed in small groups their own activities and projects by which they strengthen social cohesion. The focus of this session was to find common strategies and approaches of good practice. Among the many results were the following:

If you want to strengthen social cohesion, you will have to

- bring people together, shape dialogue and build trust.
- live and foster acceptance of diversity, openness, humanity, solidarity and mutual respect. Since these attitudes are the basis for successful interaction.

- promote the participation of all and strengthen competences for engaging constructively with diversity.
- start at the local level, where people meet and shape their everyday lives together.

Stage Talk: How to be an activist promoting social cohesion in a world of diversity

During our Stage Talk and subsequent discussion rounds, the five activists Anna Alboth, Hanno Burmester, Lorenzo Marsili, Ophélié Omnes and Margarita Tsomou shared their personal experiences, learnings and gained insights on their commitments to social cohesion. Some important thoughts on how to strengthen social cohesion and how to be an activist engaging in this effort were the following:

- **Be an Amateur:** Do not be afraid to start projects, because you think you do not have enough experience. If you do not try, you will have already failed.
- **Understand conflicts as a chance and deal with them constructively:** Conflicts are a normal part of life. They can be a chance for understanding and allow us to learn more about what is important to oneself and others. Therefore, you should not avoid them. It is rather crucial to get into dialogue with each other and seek solutions all together. In a diverse society, the process of negotiation and understanding, as well as the willingness to compromise are fundamental to shape a cohesive living together and can be the starting point to create something new.
- **In order to promote cohesion, we need a global and participatory approach in our interconnected world.** It is therefore important to promote alliances, networks and exchange between people from across different cultural, social and national backgrounds in order to foster social cohesion in European societies and communities.
- **Art and culture bring different people together and are therefore a good tool to strengthen social cohesion.**

Open House: Dealing with diversity and rapid change – Building bridges for social cohesion from a local perspective

Social cohesion starts at the local level where people encounter and interact in their everyday lives. Therefore, local approaches are promising to promote social cohesion. The participants discussed with the mayors Martine Quaknine (Nice) and Marian Schreier (Tengen) on how local politics deals with social cohesion and what local politics can or should do to foster it. One of the key insights of this discussion was that trust in institutions and civic participation are important for strong social cohesion. In order to achieve these two objections, local decision-makers need to be patient, have close and regular contact with the population, and allow them to be involved in the legislative-process early on. If they fail on the latter, any attempt of dialogue might be seen as political opportunism. Furthermore, local decision-makers should meet activists at the centre of the lives, rather than inviting them to a town hall.

Panel: How to reach real transformation?

In a moderated round, Anisah Osman Britton, Mina Jaf, Morgan Meaker and Aline Muyleart (“30 under 30 Europe”-Forbes-List) talked about how one can really move and change something and foster social cohesion in different ways. The focus was on personal learnings. Key thoughts on personal development, empowerment and capacity building were the following:

- Take action: It is not enough to talk about social cohesion and discuss solutions. Rather, an active commitment through voluntary or full-time work is needed.
- Take care of your own development: Learn new skills and educate yourself, but also give yourself breaks and take time to regenerate
- Empower others: For living together in diversity in a peaceful, solidarity-based and democratic way, people need social, democratic competences as well as the chance to participate. Therefore, one important approach to foster social cohesion is empowerment and capacity building.
- Create spaces and places for encounter and dialogue: Create and shape spaces where people can come together, meet each other and participate in social or political life.
- Find your passion and join forces with others: Find the topic you deeply care about and become active! Find other people who are also enthusiastic about the topic and meet those who have already achieved the goals that you have set for yourself.
- Steer emotions like anger into constructive tracks and use them as a drive: If you learn to deal with them constructively, you can even turn emotions like indignation or anger into something productive
- It’s o.k. to work “for profit”: Being an advocate for social good and working “for profit” are not mutually exclusive. A regular income can help you to be financially independent and allows you to hire even more qualified people
- Create and maintain networks: Together you are stronger than alone. Find peers to network with and support and inspire each other

Workshops: Learning more about good practice – Examples and methods to foster social cohesion

In five parallel workshops, the participants dealt with concrete and transferrable good practice approaches to foster social cohesion.

- Promote intercultural dialogue: The card game “More than one Story” is a powerful method to build bridges between people from different backgrounds, foster mutual understanding, respect and open-mindedness and reduce fear and prejudices. A key learning is: Recognize the unique experiences of each person. Challenge your perception and do not put people in a box. Everyone has more than one story to tell. The game is easy to understand and can be played without much effort in different group sizes and contexts.

- Foster strong and resilient communities: Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach to create changes and shape strong resilient communities. Instead of asking people, “what’s the matter with you’ ABCD asks, “what matters to you”? The approach does not focus on what is missing or wrong and thus on a deficit or problem-oriented view of communities. Rather it concentrates on the resources and potentials (“From wrong to strong”): What do people of a community care about enough to act. The method can be used to initiate and shape change processes in communities
- Promote a constructive debate culture: Social media is clearly influencing our social interaction and debate culture. To promote constructive dialogue and a democratic debate culture, it is necessary to provide information and trainings for (young) people to be better equipped to counter hate speech and fake news and to contribute to a solutions-oriented, respectful discourse. Therefore it is important to foster reflection upon ones’ own online behaviour and consumption of information as well as promote social and media competences like the project “debate//” does.
- Strengthen participation and trust in democracy: Democracy works best if people get involved, participate in solving political and social problems and help to shape the society (community) they are living in. The project “Democracy Labs” provides a lot of tools and methods for civic education with children and youth. They can be downloaded free and used in various contexts to strengthen cohesion.
- Foster community integration: Fostering community integration, intercultural dialogue and participation among different groups, that normally wouldn’t come in contact with each other, fosters social cohesion in diversity. Creating opportunities where different people or groups can meet each other helps building inclusive networks and counters prejudice and exclusion. Community building – as the platform “Give Something back to Berlin” is engaged in – contributes to citizens feeling connected and identifying with diverse societies

Pro Action Café: Action to promote social cohesion

In the Pro Action Café, the focus was on transferring the many impulses from the previous sessions into ones’ own engagement. The participants raised questions, topics and ideas and discussed possible solutions and the next steps for action.

- Foster cultural development through citizenship participation
- Look after yourself and well-being as an activist
- How to build a profitable business and still support / have social impact
- Role which media play for social cohesion
- Dealing with diversity
- Rise of islamophobia across Europe
- Youth employment
- Youth participation



Young Europeans' Forum 2019 “Building Bridges for Social Cohesion”

Recommendations for action

1. **Shape social relationships:**

The quality of social relationships is an essential basis of social cohesion. Build trusting, resilient and appreciative social relationships and create opportunities for people to encounter and interact in a respectful way.

2. **Start at the local level:**

If you want to strengthen social cohesion, you should start on a local level. For we can strengthen social cohesion actively best in everyday life, where people meet and interact with each other and shape living together.

3. **Promote dialogue:**

Dialogue fosters mutual understanding, allows solving conflicts peacefully and shape living together. Bring people together, shape dialogue and build trust.

4. **Foster skills for dialogue and diversity:**

The abilities of showing empathy, engaging in dialogue and changing perspectives is important for promoting and “living” social cohesion. Furthermore, it is necessary for a fruitful living together between people with different values, backgrounds and lifestyles, that people accept diversity, see it as an enrichment and a source of creativity and innovation and have competences to deal with it constructively. Help people developing these skills.

5. **Be an Amateur:**

Do not be afraid to start back projects just because you think you do not have enough experience. If you do not try, you will have already failed.

6. **Understand conflicts as a chance and deal with them constructively:**

Conflicts are a normal part of life. They can be a chance for understanding and allow us to learn more about what is important to oneself and others. Therefore, you should not avoid them. It is rather crucial to get into dialogue with each other and seek solutions together. In a diverse society, process of negotiation and understanding, as well as the willingness to compromise, are fundamental to shape a more cohesive society and can be the starting point to create something new.

7. Build networks and think global:

In order to promote cohesion in our globalised world, it is important to promote alliances, networks and exchange between people from across cultural, social and national backgrounds.

8. Foster democratic values:

Social cohesion is also a matter of attitude and democratic and human-rights-based values are a normative basis for a fruitful living together in diversity. Live and promote values like acceptance of diversity, respect, open-mindedness, tolerance, peace, solidarity and humanity.

9. Take action:

It is not enough to talk about social cohesion and discuss solutions. Rather, an active commitment through voluntary or full-time work is needed.

10. Take care of your own development:

Learn new skills and educate yourself, but also give yourself breaks and take time to regenerate.

11. Empower others:

For living together in diversity in a peaceful, solidarity-based and democratic way, people need social, democratic competences as well as the chance to participate. Therefore, one important approach to foster social cohesion is empowerment and capacity building. Strengthen others and offer them opportunities. Create spaces and places for people to feel comfortable and express themselves.

12. Create spaces and places for encounters and dialogue:

Create and shape spaces where people can come together, meet each other and participate in social or political life.

13. Find your passion and join forces with others:

Find the topic you deeply care about and become active! Find other people who are also enthusiastic about the topic and meet those who have already achieved what you have set out to achieve.

14. Steer emotions like anger into constructive tracks and use them as a drive:

If you learn to deal with them constructively, you can turn emotions like indignation or anger into something productive

15. It's o.k. to not only work "non-profit" but also work "for profit":

Being an advocate for social good and working "for profit" are not mutually exclusive. A regular income can help you to be financially independent and allows you to hire people that are even more qualified.

16. Create and maintain networks:

Together you are stronger than alone. Find peers to network with, and support and inspire each other.

17. Listen:

Listen respectfully to your counterpart. Do not already think about your answer, but try to put yourself someone else's shoes. Find similarities and ask questions.

18. Be genuine:

Help others and offer your skills to those who need them the most. Be honest and convinced of your ideas.

19. Tell a Story:

Link your theme with a story to bring it closer to the people, but never forget that people have more than one story.

20. Be a Hero:

Be a role model for others and embody the ideals you want to see in the world.

21. From wrong to strong:

Focus on strengths and potentials of people or communities instead of the deficits and problems. Do not ask what is wrong with people, but rather what matters to them and what they want to change.