



Building Social Bonds

Youth in Action: Strategies for Fostering Social Solidarity Among Young People

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What is social solidarity? What challenges does it face nowadays? What are its advantages, and what initiatives can be implemented to foster it among young people? Let's explore some responses to those inquiries.

Social solidarity is characterized as a collective action emerging from shared interests, specifically the goods and objectives that hold significance for all individuals within a particular group. Solidarity entails an acknowledgment of interdependence among individuals, fostering a willingness to act for the benefit of others rather than solely for personal gain.



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In addition to a community of action and shared interests, the hallmarks of social justice include:

- transferring the repercussions of social risks from individuals to society as a whole, thereby ensuring that the community assumes responsibility for the welfare of all its members,
- ethical values that compel us to assist individuals in more challenging life circumstances,
- existence in every group or community, irrespective of its size.

Within the context of social solidarity, initiatives are undertaken that encompass a neighborhood, a city, a region, and ultimately one or more countries, or even the entire globe.^[2]

Challenges of social cohesion

Currently, social solidarity encounters numerous challenges, including demographic shifts and constrained resources. The discourse also highlights the rise of individualism and social atomization, which diminishes individuals' engagement in activities that benefit others. Furthermore, globalization and mass migrations may incite tensions among various social groups, complicating the establishment of solidarity. Cultural and economic disparities can exacerbate conflicts and result in the marginalization of certain groups. While the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion often serve as a foundation for defining types of social solidarity.^[3]



In Łukasz Budzyński's article, it is noted that within the framework of inclusiveness, we can identify:

- primary solidarity, characterized by exclusive mechanisms that favor the dominant group over others, and
- civic solidarity through existing inclusive mechanisms for groups distinct from the dominant one.

The author observes that primary solidarity preferences will rise in response to perceived threats to social and cultural security.

Why is social solidarity significant for young people?

Despite the ongoing and upcoming challenges to social solidarity, it remains a vital element of life in society. It is particularly significant for young people as it supports the development of individuals and entire groups. By engaging in solidarity initiatives, young people feel that they are part of a larger whole, gain a sense of influence and self-agency,^[4] and learn to collaborate with others while respecting diversity. Social solidarity promotes values such as helping the vulnerable, taking responsibility for others, and being ready to act for the common good. These qualities are crucial for shaping the next generation as active and responsible citizens.

Among the various advantages, one notable benefit is the cultivation of intergenerational bonds,^[5] as community activities involve individuals of all ages and facilitate the exchange of experiences. Initiatives aimed at benefiting others and promoting the common good also enhance resilience in times of crisis—during challenging periods such as pandemics, climate emergencies, or social conflicts, solidarity fosters mutual support. Young individuals who observe such behaviors develop a belief that collaboration is instrumental in overcoming challenges.

Shaping the leaders of tomorrow is another benefit derived from social solidarity. Through participation in social movements or solidarity initiatives, young individuals cultivate organizational abilities, teamwork competencies, and a willingness to take initiative.

How can we involve young individuals in solidarity initiatives?

It is essential for young individuals to have the opportunity to articulate their opinions and ideas. Organizing open meetings with representatives from local institutions, as well as workshops or discussion panels, enables young people to engage actively in decision-making processes. Tailoring social activities to align with the interests of youth, such as through social media or gamification, will enhance the appeal and accessibility of these initiatives. Furthermore, young people should perceive that their involvement yields tangible outcomes.^[6]

When engaging young individuals in social solidarity initiatives, it is essential to equip them with the appropriate tools. Facilitating their acquisition of new skills through training and workshops enhances their self-confidence and capacity to participate in the public domain.

Additionally, it is beneficial to establish clear objectives.



Young individuals frequently participate in endeavors that align with their values and have a distinct objective, such as environmental protection or the promotion of equality. These initiatives ought to be customized to address local requirements and yield measurable outcomes.^[7]

Effective practices - cultivating empathy through action

Cultivating empathy is a fundamental aspect of involving young individuals in social solidarity initiatives. Through active participation in diverse activities, young people can gain insights into the perspectives of others and forge more profound social connections. Let us examine tangible examples of youth engagement.

Gold Rush - Scholars for Scholars

The Lublin District Branch of the Red Cross operates the “Gold Rush” initiative, wherein volunteers—typically students—gather 1, 2, and 5 grosz coins. The funds amassed during the campaign support summer camps for underprivileged children.^[8]

IT IS US!

TO(działa(MY!)) is an educational and social initiative executed by UNICEF and the Santander Bank Polska Foundation, engaging hundreds of schools across Poland in the development of social projects. Under the guidance of teachers, students formulate concepts for initiatives targeting local communities and can apply for grants to bring these ideas to fruition. Over three editions, 56 grants have been awarded, enabling young individuals to realize their visions.



Gł_(I)odówka – we share breakfast

Students from Primary School No. 162 in Łódź developed a project designed to assist students in need by establishing a corner for sharing second breakfasts. The initiative involved acquiring a refrigerator and raising awareness about hunger and food waste, fostering a culture of mutual care and environmental stewardship. As a result of this endeavor, students were able to share meals and provide support to their peers facing challenging circumstances.^[9]

Gray walls

The project "Grey Walls," executed by six high school students from the 1st General High School in Toruń, received a distinction in the Zwolnieni z Teorii competition. The initiative aimed to convert dull, unattractive walls and graffiti into uplifting and positive urban environments. The students covered unsightly inscriptions with motivational quotes and vibrant images, intending to enhance the city's aesthetics and elicit smiles from the residents. The "Grey Walls" project was recognized at the Social Projects Gala, where outstanding social initiatives were honored.

Exemption from Theory

Given the focus on the practical Olympiad, it merits a dedicated discussion. For more than a decade, this event has consistently engaged young individuals in initiatives that benefit the community. Organized by the Zwolnieni z Teorii Foundation, the Olympiad enables participants to apply their knowledge in practical settings while cultivating essential skills for the labor market, including management, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. The 11th edition of the Olympiad is scheduled for the 2024/2025 academic year and is held under the honorary patronage of the Ministry of Education. Previous editions have seen participation from over 16,000 students. Participants also have the opportunity to earn international certificates, which can enhance their prospects in academic admissions and future employment.

Intergenerational service volunteering

Intergenerational volunteering seeks to forge connections between youth and seniors, fostering an environment of mutual support and experience sharing. These programs not only assist seniors with their daily tasks but also allow young individuals to cultivate empathy, responsibility, and interpersonal skills.

Collaboration across generations aids in dismantling stereotypes and fortifying social ties, a necessity in the context of an aging society. Illustrative examples of specific intergenerational volunteering initiatives demonstrate how young people can actively participate in the lives of seniors and provide support across various facets of their well-being.



Creating computer graphics and animations in intergenerational collaborations.

The Municipal Council of Seniors in Stare Babice, in collaboration with the local community center, organized computer graphics classes in June 2023, which were attended by seniors and youth aged 12-19. Participants, working in intergenerational pairs, created graphics and stop-motion animations utilizing the free programs Canva and StopMotion. The resulting works were subsequently showcased at an exhibition held at the Stare Babice Community Center.^[10]

Desire for engagement in Krakow

In 2017, seniors and youth in Krakow had the opportunity to participate in classes organized at the Krakow Food Industry School Complex. Participants in the "Appetite for Action" event collaborated in cooking and learned the art of carving, a technique for sculpting fruits and vegetables that originates from the Far East. The event concluded with a mass and a festive Christmas Eve celebration. This project was executed as part of the Krakow competition "Let's Act Together."^[11]

Intergenerational bridge tournament in Białystok

The Białystok Foundation of the Center for Initiatives for Society hosted an intergenerational bridge tournament in 2021, featuring participation from both seniors and youth. This event was part of a larger initiative titled "For a Healthy and Better Future" and was co-financed by the Aktywni+ program of the Minister of Family and Social Policy for the years 2021-2025.^[12]

Sway the vessel to the cadence of hip hop.

Members of the group "Yo! Yo! Seniorzy," with the assistance of the Regional Volunteer Center "Centerko," conducted dance classes in schools and community centers throughout Łódź. Seniors instructed children in hip-hop dancing, which captivated the youth. As the project's culmination, an intergenerational after-party was organized, where seniors and young people enjoyed themselves together to the rhythm of hip-hop music.^[13]

Days of Unity

One effective approach to address exclusion while simultaneously raising societal awareness of the challenges faced by marginalized individuals is through the implementation of Solidarity Days. These events are designed to illuminate the issue of social exclusion and foster solidarity initiatives across diverse contexts. Within this framework, workshops, discussions, and other activities are organized to facilitate the integration and support of those experiencing marginalization. Let us examine several examples of such initiatives from various European countries, all united by the common goal of combating exclusion.

Days of Solidarity with Individuals Facing Mental Crises

The Sopot Association on the Path of Expression annually organizes the Days of Solidarity with Individuals Experiencing Mental Crises, titled "Change Your Head."^[14] This event features the Tri-City March for Mental Health, the Tolerance Festival, as well as informational meetings, exhibitions of outsider artists, debates, and workshops, where participants can explore effective practices in providing assistance. The initiative also emphasizes the importance of engaging individuals with mental illness and their families in fulfilling social and professional roles, while promoting a community-based model of support for those affected by mental health issues.

Complimentary retail establishment in Latvia

Latvian volunteers have established a venue in Riga where, once a week, individuals can donate unwanted clothing, books, and household items, while also having the opportunity to find something for themselves. This initiative, known as Brīvboде^[15] (Latvian for "free shop"), seeks to enhance social connections and encourage a sustainable lifestyle to minimize resource waste. The project is executed as part of the European Solidarity Corps.^[16]

The Room – Community Theatre in Ireland

Another initiative organized by members of the European Solidarity Corps is Irish community theatre.^[17] Volunteers from Ireland have established a theatre for asylum seekers in Newbridge, County Kildare. The performances occur weekly and aim to raise awareness of the challenges faced by refugees, demonstrating that they are as human as those fortunate enough to be born in a safe environment.

Day of Solidarity with Refugees – Poland's Stance Against Racism and Violence

October 15 marks the National Day of Solidarity with Refugees,^[18] aimed at raising awareness about the plight of individuals who, in pursuit of a better life and often fleeing conflict and poverty, choose to leave their homeland in search of refuge in Europe. This topic is of significant importance and has evoked considerable emotion in recent years; however, it is crucial to recognize that the decision to abandon one's home is never made lightly and frequently entails profound human tragedies to which we must remain sensitive. Events commemorating the National Day of Solidarity with Refugees are organized by various institutions, including the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Through workshops, debates, and lectures, the narratives of refugees and the challenges they encounter are highlighted. The organizers also address the underlying causes of alarming phenomena such as hatred, racism, and xenophobia.

World Braille Day

The United Nations has designated January 4th as World Braille Day, commemorating Louis Braille, the inventor of the script utilized by individuals with visual impairments. This alphabet enables those with sight challenges to read, learn, and engage with the contemporary world. To address the social exclusion faced by these individuals, the Polish Association of the Blind conducts sessions that teach blind individuals how to utilize the Braille alphabet.^[19]

Summary

Social solidarity, characterized as a collective endeavor stemming from shared interests, is essential for fostering harmonious relationships within society. It relies on cooperation, accountability towards others, and ethical principles, including support for the vulnerable. Despite the current challenges to social solidarity, such as fragmentation, globalization, and intergroup conflicts, its advancement is achievable through inclusive strategies, such as organizing events that engage marginalized individuals and enhance social awareness. Participation in social activities cultivates cooperation, respect for diversity, and fosters a sense of agency, which is especially vital for the youth.

Practical examples, such as the Gold Rush and Grey Walls initiatives, illustrate how young individuals can significantly influence their environment while cultivating empathy and organizational skills. Intergenerational projects and activities aimed at the marginalized enhance social connections, instilling a sense of responsibility and collaboration in young people. Through solidarity, youth emerge as future leaders, equipped to navigate a diverse and dynamic world, thereby establishing this value as the cornerstone for constructing a sustainable civil society.

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