CREATING SPACE FOR ACTION

LESSONS LEARNED FROM WORKING
WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ON
INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY





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Summary

This publication provides reflections on how young people organize an experimental project on international solidarity. These reflections are intended to inform everyone who is working directly with (international) young people on a broad range of citizenship topics or who is shaping (international) programs and services for young people. Instead of being a ready-made recipe book, the 11 ideas presented here remain essentially reflective. As such, they can be either adopted for or adapted to specific contexts and needs.

Experimental international solidarity projects are specifically designed to immerse young people in direct action. They foster (international) exchange and are an outlet for young people's creative and critical thought. Addressing complex issues, working in culturally diverse settings via non-traditional collaborations are important driving forces for those involved. The power to adapt coupled with a risk-taking frame of mind makes young people innovative and agile; their knowledge and their consciousness of global issues result in their becoming intelligent project partners. Furthermore, the process of organizing international solidarity projects creates the capacity to act. This way of working also leads to the realisation that world citizenship encompasses more than individual learning experiences.

To embark on a youth-organizing journey is easier said than done: it could clash with the usual way in which NGOs operate or with schools' or other organisations' (internal) politics, educational goals, financial or pre-defined programs and strategies that determine priorities or project choices. To have young people rethink and challenge existing international solidarity projects and to engage in experimentation requires a bold approach - one in which their creativity and critical thought are supported not by fanciful exercises or methods, but by letting them develop open-mindedly ab initio.

This leaves us with questions regarding the role of professionals and organisations involved in the organizing of youth. As this project demonstrates, young people do develop international solidarity independently and begin to act as social agents of change. To become social agents of change, young people require an "audience", which means that their ideas and projects need to be integrated in the conventional spheres of action and power. Youth citizenship projects frequently either lack the link with actual decision–makers or miss the opportunity of being heard. Bridging this gap between youth and people in power could present a challenging opportunity for professionals and organisations. If successfully managed, it creates new and exciting possibilities.



Introduction

A white paper from The Centre for Global Education highlights the vision vis-à-vis global citizenship education (GCE) of more than 1300 young people worldwide¹. The paper describes what young people find relevant in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs and projects related to global challenges and citizenship. Rather than promoting an individual feel-good citizenship, the recommendations in this paper promote a GCE which addresses root causes and the complexity of non-traditional collaborations.

The recommendations are very much in line with the evolving nature of how young people commit to today's global challenges. Driven by the urgency of climate change amidst other issues of public concern (social injustice, economic inequalities etc.), and supported by impelling examples of public outcry (climate marches, #me too, Black Lives Matter, and the like) as well as driven by social media, young and engaged people show independence, a readiness to embark on action and a strong DIY-mentality when it comes to their civic engagement. The underlying mechanism that gives rise to this new way of commitment can best be labelled as individualized engagement². Young people act conscientiously and in a well-balanced and sensible way when addressing certain topics. Driven by concrete action, local experiences and direct interactions, they find it essential to develop and maintain a focus on a 'learning-by-doing' approach.

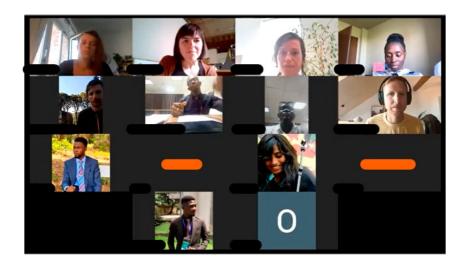
The changing nature of young people's civic engagement raises issues for those accustomed to a mostly silent and compliant youth. Large hierarchical institutions, member-based volunteering organizations, educators, NGOs and other organizations attempting to seduce young people with fixed and ready-made programs are experiencing the growing difficulty of engaging them in their causes. How to set up international solidarity projects with young people in the current era of individualized engagement? And how to bring young people on the one hand, and educators, NGOs, policymakers, youth workers, and public officials on the other closer together in their work to tackle global challenges? What should the role of organizations working with young people be? What do young people need?

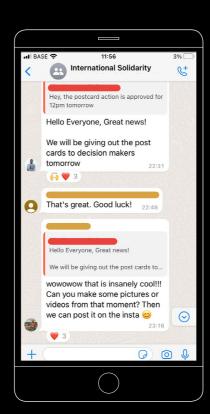
¹ https://www.ualberta.ca/educational-policy-studies/media-library/cgcer/documents/white-paper.pdf

² https://methos.eu/en/work/youth-civic-engagement-participatory-project

These questions prompted the idea of initiating an experimental project where young people took the initiative. Commissioned by Enabel, the Belgian development agency, and implemented by Méthos in collaboration with Globelink, the goal was to give the floor to young people and support them in developing an experimental project which challenged existing international solidarity projects. This resulted in "Alarm Cards for Action", a postcard project conceptualized and executed by a group of international youth. They created and developed the project independently during 18 (bi-) weekly online meetings from April 2022 to October 2022.

In this publication we present some of the lessons we have learned during the course of these 7 months. We don't provide the reader with a ready-made recipe for organizing projects with young people nor do we list the dos and don'ts. Instead, we provide reflections on what has been learned. We highlight what organizations and professionals could provide and should take into account when working with an international group of young people. The information gleaned should help facilitate young people's involvement in international solidarity projects in a way that is aligned with current mechanisms of engagement and volunteering.







About the project

"Can you all hear me?" With these words, the first meeting started on March 23rd 2022. Only 5 young people from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, India and Belgium logged in on Jitsi. The aim of the meeting was to get to know each other, discuss the general idea of the project and talk about expectations and ambitions. What followed was a chaotic meeting with people continuously connecting and disconnecting, all the while punctuated by awkward silences as people had to rely on bad internet connections. By the end of the meeting, only half of what had been planned was addressed.

Fast forward, 7 months later. Representatives of our group at COP27 in Sharm-el-Sheikh officially delivered their Alarm Cards to decision-makers. What had started out earlier as a small and muddled meeting with a broad goal ("develop a project that challenges existing ways of doing international solidarity projects") culminated in COP 27.

The participation at meetings was not compulsory, and attendance varied each time between 5 and 17 people. During the brainstorming and ideation there was a marked increase in group attendance. Towards the end of the project, a smaller core team of 5 participants did most of the practical work. To assemble the group, a call for participation from Globelink's network of young climate activists was made and disseminated via their respective networks, interested people being incrementally added to the common whats-app group (35 people). Participation at meetings depended on individual time zones and personal interest. The age of the participants varied between 21 and 27 years. They came from a wide range of countries – Belgium, India, Liberia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda, UK and the USA. The meetings took place in a very polite, constructive and committed atmosphere.

During 18 online meetings (2h each) over the course of 7 months, the group of young people expanded systematically as they developed their project, facilitated by Globelink and Méthos. Only a very general roadmap existed, no pre-defined or result-oriented planning or set of objectives guided the project. Every meeting had its own goal which then augmented the previous one. The purpose of the first 2 meetings was the introduction of the project and the business of getting to know everyone. The participants had to gradually make the project their own by discussing and challenging the initial ideas and its starting point. During meetings 3, 4, and 5 the group brainstormed about possible ideas and projects. We moved from a big and broad ideation to a selection of ideas

based on the criteria of feasibility and originality. Three ideas were reserved, which led to a sixth meeting in which there was a group-based pitch for each idea, followed by a voting session at the end of the meeting. The group voted for a post-card project. In meeting 7 there were reservations about the chosen project; nevertheless the postcard project was retained. Meetings 8 and 9 were used to set up and apportion the to-do and various task lists. In meetings 10 and 11 the core team worked on the details of the postcard project and made decisions which impacted the future of the project (e.g. name, visual identity, communication, and so on). The individual postcards were created during meetings 12, to 17, along with supplementary tasks such as communication. The final meeting was a feedback and evaluation session.

The participation of young people was on a voluntary basis but costs were reimbursed, while for some participants a fee or allowance for internet data was allocated.

The postcard project itself was selected from more than 40 ideas. The initial idea was to address local leaders with postcards made by young people in their communities (e.g. schools, organisations, youth work, etc.). The project was gradually refined and perfected. In preference to local leaders, decision-makers at COP27 were targeted. Two people from our group attended the Sharm-el-Sheikh climate conference and distributed the cards. The postcard project was named "Alarm Cards for Action" to stress the urgency of climate change. The participants focused on climate change victims by sending their messages and their daily realities to decision-makers. The participants listed the alarm cards' specifics and advantages as follows:

- It remains important to re-emphasize climate awareness messages and show leaders from all over the world that young people are affected on a daily basis by climate change.
- 2. Climate issues are very often generalized. The alarm card project is an opportunity for people to express themselves on an individual level about how they experience climate change and show the ugly reality of climate change in all parts of the world.
- 3. The alarm cards are not only about the receiver. The act of making a card is actual and factual. For those making the card it is an educational process that raises individual awareness; it could also be a call to action or a call for support.
- 4. By addressing climate change victims all over the world, the alarm card project can grow into a movement, into something bigger.



Dear Minister

I assume you are joining us to witness the greatest flood our country has faced in recent times, it makes us both sad and angry that we've been left open to such disasters, were they not predictable? Do we not have reports of possible disasters as such and why was nothing done? To say we have been disappointed is an understatement. The image attached to this postcard is nothing compared to what our fellow citizens are facing in other states.

Are we going to continue denying the existence of climate change and its effect on us? Are we going to continue denying the impact of climate change especially in our lands and on our citizens? Are we going to blame it on past governments? it is evident that mitigating its effect should become a top priority for the government.

The image attached shows how access to quality education has been hindered by the flooding, it cuts across so many other rights. Hence, we call on you to work tirelessly to restore and preserve what was lost and what we have left. We are watching and history will not forget the actions you take today.





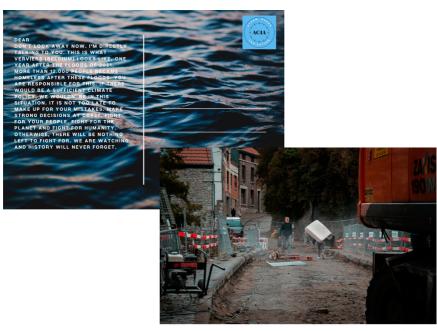


Nigeria is experiencing and unprecedented wave of flooding across various states in the country, we all know what that mean loss of lives, livelihood, shelter, goods and properties etc. there's no need to explain the economi effects of these occurrences in the

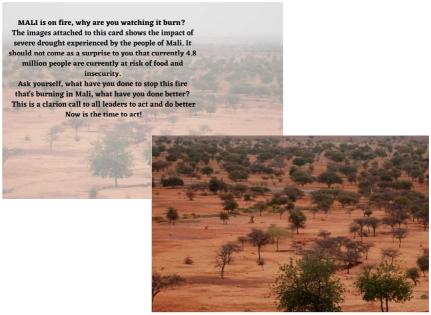
Estimates have it that by 2030-2050 most coastal cities in the world will be overrun by water. Do we not consider Nigeria to have Coastal cities? Do we think climate change doesn't affect us? And what are you doing currently about the situation and to prevent it's

The effects of climate change cuts across every sector. The most affected is agriculture, floods wash away our crops, rain is not as predictable as before, animals are migrating in search of better habitats, some species are facing extinction too. Would we look back in the next 10-20 years and wish we acted earlier? The time is now minister and we want to see you actively work to tackle this issues, we are watching and history will not forget the actions you





VERVIERS, BELGIUM | AUGUST 2022 | 1 YEAR AFTER THE FLOODS



MALI

11

Reflections on Youth Organizing & International Solidarity



1. Young people as partners

To regard young people as generators of social change, they should be addressed as independent content-creators.

This position creates a more equal relationship between participants and facilitators.

Collaborating with young people in a project requires thinking about their status within the project. What is their position? What does it imply for the facilitators' role? The project's underlying concept is that young people are capable of generating social change. They are capable of working on global issues, tackling global challenges, addressing root causes, setting up concrete projects, and the like. As such, we see them as independent content creators, rather than as learners. The position held by young people in a project has implications for how they see themselves. To be in a situation where they have an independent, equal voice and are able to direct the project, they develop a sense of self and competency or efficacy. Efficacy is defined as the belief in one's own abilities to successfully influence one's environment. Even if young people are not always able to do so, the experience of being independent in setting up concrete and valuable projects is an important first step.

The roles of both the young people and the facilitators are not static throughout the project. Both parties act as in a partnership, each having differing roles and responsibilities. Whereas the former take the lead in content development, the facilitators' role may best be described as providing assistance, support and activation. Initially, the facilitation consists of project assistance (organizing meetings, making agendas, practical arrangements, drafting progress reports, timing, moderating and so on.). As the project develops, young people gradually take control over some aspects of the facilitation work (e.g. agenda setting).

Story

While discussing the age range concerning the call for climate photos, the group began by suggesting that it be set between 18 and 45. However, the facilitators thought it was important to include younger people. Even after several arguments for lowering the age bracket, no one seemed convinced. But then another participant unexpectedly joined the meeting and heard about the discussion. Subsequently after a number of (similar) proposals, the group settled on an age bracket of 15 to 45. This example clearly indicates the role of the facilitators, i.e. non-involvement in content discussion between the participants.



2. Enabling relationships of trust

Trustworthy interactions constitute one of the essential elements in creating a safe space.

A relationship of trust between both the participants and facilitators is essential but difficult to achieve. Moreover, it has to function on many levels and entails an all-round and effective set of soft skills. The relevance of good listening skills and adaptability is not to be underestimated.

A relationship of trust is the basis for a smooth collaboration but must also take into account the wish of young people to act and move ahead.

In a solid, trusting group there is a mutual reliance on one another that makes tackling challenges and risk taking easier. For young people to thrive, it is essential to create a space without any room for conflicts, bias, judgment or personal critique. Fundamentally necessary is their intrinsic motivation rather than external expectations or needs.

Example

Relatively early on in the project a participant sent a message to the facilitators containing feedback, critique and concern about the project's democratic standing. To have done so demands courage, but also implies involvement and the trust that any kind of feedback will be taken seriously.



3. The process is the product

Time is needed to collectively build up a democratic process that fortifies and connects the participants.

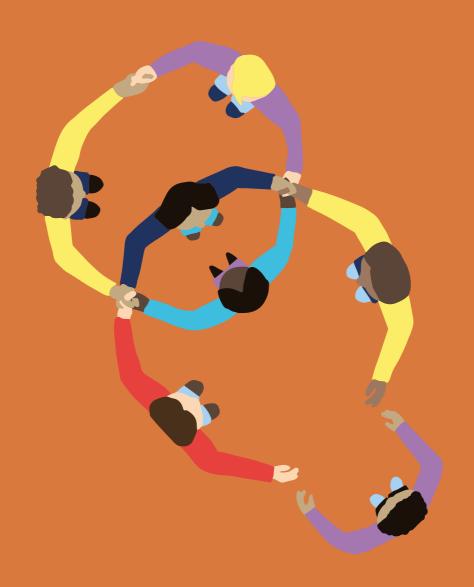
It is important that the focus lies on the entire process rather than merely on the result. The uniqueness of this kind of work is not necessarily the exercises or methods applied but the emphasis on engaging youth in a democratic process. Constant consultation, deliberation, discussion, mutual decisions and create a robust engagement, a truly democratic experience and a sense of collective ownership.

Accordingly, it is necessary to emphasise the potential within the process to create both a greater sense of belonging and to bolster the feeling of shared responsibility that drives participation and creates commitment

It is not the end-product itself that is important, but the fact that young people experience an entire process in which they are able to find themselves and gain the knowledge and confidence to develop future youth leadership skills and the ability to engage in youth organizing and youth programming.

Story

From the facilitators' point of view, it was sometimes challenging to put up with the twists and turns of the process. By trusting the young people and respecting their timeline and agendas, it was a confirmation that a top-down approach is not needed. The weekly work and the various challenges turned out to be a very powerful tool.



4. The group as a dedicated on/off collective

A collective is formed when individuals, driven by an intrinsic motivation to take part, remain flexible and avoid implementing strict group criteria.

Assembling an international group of young people starts by deconstructing the usual ideas related to group formation, recruitment and selection criteria, e.g. selection of age brackets and background criteria etc. An organic approach whereby young people respond to a general call to take part in a project and rely on their own (international) networks of friends and acquaintances is not only an effective but also a very motivational way to build up a group. It enhances feelings of involvement and agency in all the individuals. The word "Collective" describes the participating group very well as it entails people bound together diversely and flexibly in a common purpose.

This kind of self-organizing is effective. In the present case, participants would come and go – picking up again where they had left off after having been absent for a while. Some withdrew entirely while others no longer participated in the meetings but remained active on communication channels. Then again, others joined in at a very late stage. This kind of on/off participation mi-

ght seem volatile or superficial but makes a youth project more realistic as it builds upon an intrinsic motivation to take part. In so doing the focus lies on achieving something where everyone is committed and dedicated to working on the project's goals.

Story

In the initial phases of the project new people would regularly appear and disappear. Consequently the question of group formation arose, «Do we need a dedicated group who will commit to work on this project?» But the participants were clear about group formation - the more the better - and if some people were not able to be present, it did not follow that they were not part of the project. There was never a necessity to assemble a fixed group of participants. Indeed, in the final weeks before the end of a project, someone new joined the team. This seemed to energize the group as new and fresh ideas and perspectives were discussed.



5. The need for systemic change binds the group

To directly address climate issues is the primary motivation for the young people in this project and is responsible for group cohesion.

Working remotely with bad internet connections, and in a group where the participants barely know one another could easily become the perfect recipe for a total failure to form a group at all. How then to create social cohesion? How to achieve a cohesive group which bonds even in a difficult online context?

As stated earlier, the group could best be described as a flexible collective. Given this context, creating cohesion might well pose a serious challenge. However, it is not so much the attendance at meetings but rather the project's goal and the drive to implement change and achieve impact that creates the necessary group feeling and cohesion.

Through collaboration and the ability to think collectively about global issues, building up content via discussions and debates, brainstorming, by dint of teamwork, and by sticking to the strong

belief that the actions being developed will have an impact, the group becomes a true collective with a powerful agenda.

Example

To create a group feeling we initiated the first couple of meetings with a fun exercise to break the ice (e.g. show us your room; call someone you like), but it never really took off. We then ventured into asking absurd questions (e.g. what do you think is hiding behind a rainbow?). Only gradually did such questions seem to generate some enthusiasm. Nevertheless, these ice-breakers never really caught on. Concentrating on the core issues at hand and on each day's, duties seemed more important.



6. Action-oriented from the start

Gain momentum quickly and avoid spending too much time on discussing the project's conditions.

As explained in reflection number 5, what binds young people is progress towards achieving change - the fact they develop a project together and embark on something urgent that potentially can have a real-life impact. This creates a hunger for action. Protracted discussions about aims, dreams and purpose interrupt the energy. Nevertheless, some time should still be dedicated to discussing values and visions in order to avoid an excessive focus on the end-product. Young people have to feel that what they are doing is heading towards something concrete. Even when participants work in iterative cycles (see reflection number 7) they need to get the impression that there is action and progress.

The project is entirely voluntary and as such differs greatly from how people work in a professional environment.

Volunteers experience a greater degree of freedom to focus on a plan of action. The usual difficulties with office politics, hierarchical structures, time/money concerns, fixed strategic programs and operational goals do not apply to the same extent.

"We could have gone faster, especially when discussing the details of the alarm cards. I wanted to move forward."



7. Inductive & iterative work

An inductive and iterative working method generates more opportunities than predefined programs and methods.

Inductive work allows everyone to work without framing what the project should be, without a predefined way of working and without a ready-made structure or program. The group started out with an open challenge which was slowly narrowed down step by step. This kind of inductive approach gradually builds upon the existing material. Each step in the process could lead to new ideas and opportunities.

Iterations can be seen as a tool to help finetune and specify. Iteration does not imply starting afresh, rather it denotes a cyclical building-up process by way of questioning and adaptation. Accordingly, trial and error are the norm. A group will encounter difficulties or limitations (material, time-wise etc.) but iterations make it possible to adapt to new developments.

Story

During the first couple of meetings, it was very unclear what the project would turn out to be. The group brainstormed during several me tings and delineated it gradually. Despite having to deal with a great deal of unknown material for an extended period, they did not give up but coped with the challenge and completed the project because of their drive to create impact and change.



8. Risk-takers are naturally agile

Young people are able to work with a great degree of uncertainty, adapting themselves to any given and changing circumstances. It makes them agile and innovative.

Members of a youth group who don't know each other, with very different cultural backgrounds are driven by a will to implement change. They readily involve themselves in a project not knowing where it will lead them. They cling to an ideal and are willing to bear a great degree of uncertainty.

They are not afraid to raise difficult topics and uncomfortable truths, and they are willing to engage with people in power and confront them about their responsibilities. They are prone to being quite alarmist. They do not need to feel safe and secure before they set out, but prefer instead to take risks by rushing headlong into the fray, so to speak. This mindset which goes with risk-taking fits in with projects that are tackled at grass-roots level rather than from a predetermined standpoint.

Both the mindsets of young people and their modus operandi are undoubtedly risky. Rather than having a fixed set of goals or a predefined strategy, they seize the moment which gives them the space to adapt and change easily. Moreover, they do not need much by way of material or resources. They use what is available, focus on open-access and free versions. They do not demand much support and can work resource-efficiently. Risk-taking forces a group of young people to be creative, agile and innovative.

Example

Instagram's policy and its algorithms made it impossible to collect photos from climate disasters from people worldwide. Applying last-minute bold thinking the group reinvented another strategy to collect climate disaster photos. They decided to broadcast a call via local NGOs and youth organisations in order to collect the photos.



9. Creative and critical thought engender new ideas

As creative and critical thinkers, young people develop new ideas inspired by an ambition to drive change.

Young people's drive to implement change depends on their creativity. That young people are inventive, creative, shrewd and able to think outside the box is axiomatic. Their creativity is animated by the organization and execution of the given project and should be reinforced and stimulated by granting them enough space to let ideas run amok.

Participants should be able to express alternative opinions and think critically about global issues. In addition, critical thought should be stimulated, including dissident voices.

Creative and critical thought bolster valid projects whose content is not superficial but substantial. This is fundamental in setting the stage for young people to

find ways to take a stance and pursue a worthy cause all the while gaining access to knowledge and becoming agents of social change.

Story

One of the activities in the project was to collect climate change photos. People from all over the world sent in their pictures. The quality of some of the photos was poor. Following a debate about the issue of poor quality the opinion was clear – photos depicting climate change should not be pretty. Rather the stories behind them are relevant and reveal the consequences of climate change. These photos are a call to action. In that sense aesthetics is subordinate to the critical message.

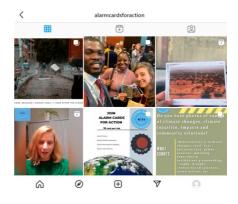


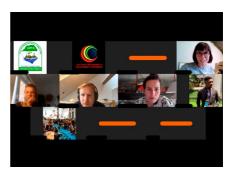
10. Visibility is a key goal

What young people do and organize is designed to create the greatest impact and widest audience. They crave visibility.

Along with the content development comes a realization of (digital) visibility. The project needs to be seen, to be spotted online. The project needs an audience, not only at the very end with the project's closure but also during the course of the project. Since visibility is crucial, also the implementation of a social media strategy is central to project work. Young people always exhibit a "digital reflex", i.e. everything they do or think has a digital component. Even during brainstorming, an idea is assessed on its visibility and digital value.

However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the (digital) communication needs and young people's actual skill set. The reality of the (digital) communication work and what it takes to reach a certain degree of visibility lowers the expectation of success. If there is anything they would need in setting up a project, it would be the expertise of communication experts who could provide powerful support to get messages across.







11. Recognizing & preventing power dynamics

Young people who are concerned about global challenges share a strong awareness about inequitable power relations. Democratic and inclusive thinking happens intuitively, not on request.

In international solidarity projects, the structural replication of patterns of power causes major concern. On all levels of collaboration, the diversity of perspectives involved might replicate privilege, patterns of powers or even the status quo. Especially in international contexts it is important to think about how to create and maintain equitable, respectful and transparent relations. This is only possible when throughout the project or at dedicated feedback moments all expectations, feelings and personal experiences are shared.

Young people who are involved in international solidarity projects have a good grasp of this topic and are wary of ignorant conduct and discourse. The majority of the group came from the Global South which advantages diversity and helped in compensating for any potentially inequitable power dynamics.

Issues in groups may arise not only between the participants but also between the participants and the facilitators. However, the principle of partnership (see reflection number 1) inhibits hierarchy and consequently a tendency to dominance.

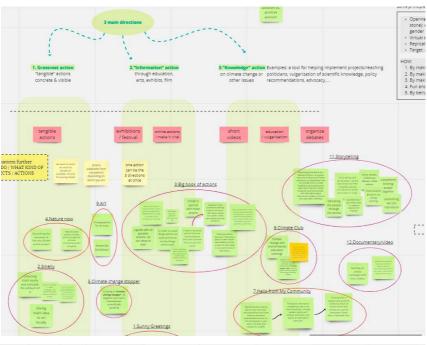
Story

During the brainstorms, a division between participants became noticeable. Participants who were from the Global South expressed a clear preference for concrete and direct grass-root actions that would bring about immediate change (e.g. beach clean-up, tree planting, etc.). Others from elsewhere seemed more concerned with awareness, art or film projects. The alarm cards comprised both aspects (awareness via cards and a call to action by addressing real and negative climate issues). This goes beyond compromise but illustrates the everyday concerns all over the world encountered in the project and approached it without any tendency to hierarchy.

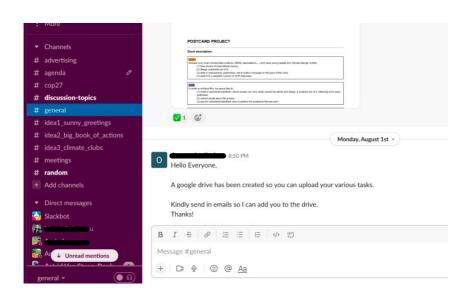
Behind the scenes

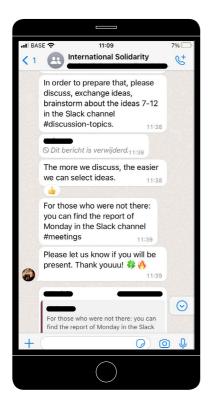
The Miro platform assembled all project related work. As the project's central space, it served as a brainstorm tool, timeline, reporting tool, task and responsibility list, pitching ground.

The Slack platform was initiated for communication and project purposes but it never took off due to a "platform overload". The combination of Miro (for project-related work) and Whatsapp (for communication) seemed to work best.











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