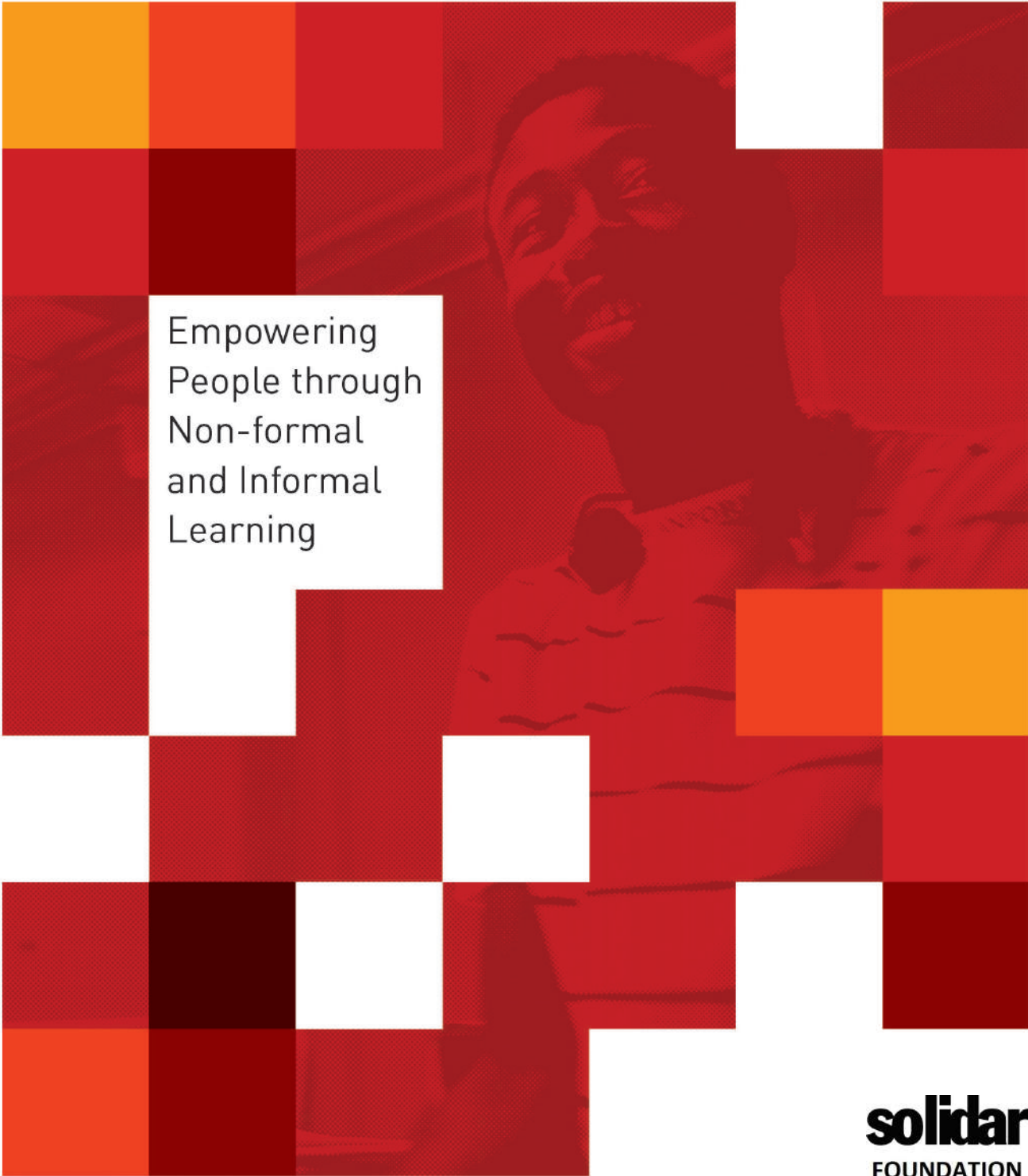


BUILDING LEARNING SOCIETIES

briefing **#63**



Empowering
People through
Non-formal
and Informal
Learning

solidar
FOUNDATION

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SOLIDAR FOUNDATION is the cooperation platform of SOLIDAR; a European network of NGOs working to advance social justice in Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR brings together 61 member organisations based in 25 EU members states and in 6 candidate countries. We work together in Social Affairs, International Cooperation and Lifelong Learning.

For more information see www.solidar.org

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Foreword

Education and training are essential ingredients for empowering people to participate in society and to explore – among other things – new employment opportunities. However, in the midst of the current social and economic crisis, the enrolment in lifelong learning throughout the European Union remains behind the agreed Education and Training 2020 target (an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning).

The number of school drop-outs has grown in several Member States, despite the Europe 2020 goal to reduce the school drop-out rates below 10 %. In addition, the transition from attending school to working and earning an income is severely undermined because of various (structural) reasons and – accelerated by further austerity-driven cutbacks in education – the number of NEETs (young people neither in employment, education or training) is increasing rapidly.

The economic and financial crisis in Europe has led to approximately 120 million people now living in or at the brink of poverty, with around 24 million “working poor” – no longer being able to live on the income they earn. The severely increasing levels of inequalities in society reflect this. Additionally, groups of migrants are in danger of further exclusion as a result of economic, social and political changes that affect the labour market.

This briefing paper presents the work of SOLIDAR members. Through highlighting their work on local level, we show innovative and effective ways of addressing current social and economic challenges. Our examples demonstrate how people can be empowered through non-formal and informal learning. Non-formal and informal learning can be a stepping-stone for further personal development – and thus a way to access further opportunities for learning and employment, especially for those seeking “another second chance”.

The examples mentioned in this paper from CSV (UK), ABF (Sweden) and CEMEA (France) highlight the methodology found in non-formal and informal learning – and demonstrate how inclusive learning societies can be organised in order to create substantial change for the individual learner as well as for society as a whole. In this paper we specifically focus on the people most at risk: Young people who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs), migrants, school drop-outs, and people facing extreme poverty.

Our vision is to promote the concept of **Building Learning Societies** – where people are empowered to participate in society. We believe this is a successful way to find and create new employment opportunities through non-formal and informal learning. We therefore advocate for **prioritising of non-formal and informal learning – for investing in validation in order to encourage learning – and for investing in education for social justice.**

Let's invest in education – by building learning societies, together!

Conny Reuter
SOLIDAR Secretary General

Executive Summary

What defines learning societies?

For SOLIDAR, **building a world where people can grow, learn and create together with others throughout life is the overarching vision**. We believe that democratic, mutual lifelong learning is important simply because learning and creating as part of a community is something that gives our existence meaning and purpose – and interacting with others through democratic learning not only improves our knowledge but also provides fulfilment and joy. As thinking and feeling entities, what could be more important? However, in the economic and social reality that we are all a part of, we must also look at the economic and social benefits of non-formal and informal learning. This report has a clear focus on how the approach of Building Learning Societies is essential for achieving the goals set by the Europe2020 strategy. Even so – we advise you to keep this paragraph in mind as the economic crisis is just another way to describe the reality and opportunities for actual European citizens.

The lasting economic crisis has a severe impact on European societies. Certain groups of people are now further removed from normative society, making the road to full social, labour market and democratic participation longer and full of obstacles. These groups include young adults who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs), migrants, school drop-outs and people living in exhaustive poverty. It is estimated that close to 120 million people in Europe are already living in poverty – or are exposed to the risk of falling into poverty.

For these people, providing more opportunities for education is not going to be enough. The gap between where they stand and the rest of society is simply too vast. Thus, a new focus on “bridging that gap” is needed. To address these challenges, SOLIDAR together with its members, work to promote the approach of **Building Learning Societies**, where people are empowered to participate in society and to finding new employment opportunities through non-formal and informal learning. This publication provides an insight on how the methodology of **Building Learning Societies** is currently organised and realised throughout Europe, by members of SOLIDAR.

The characteristics for **Building Learning Societies**:

- Learning societies are defined by **mutual; multicultural learning**; it is fundamentally about people learning by working together, with equality and democracy as the basic principles
- In learning societies, participation should preferably be voluntary and based on the individual's own **motivation** and **willingness to learn, discuss, work and create together** with others
- Participation is a key word for all aspects of learning societies and although there can be organisers, teachers and experts involved, learning societies depend upon **everyone having access to and being a part of the decision making** and the evolvement of the activities – helping to both shape them and define them
- In learning societies, **all learning styles are equal**, meaning the belief that there is a way for all participants to learn and be a part of the evolving process is essential

- 
- In learning societies, efforts are constantly made **to recognise and counteract attitudes** and behaviour that create normative thinking and unbalanced power structures within a group
 - Working in learning societies means being part of a **collective process** where customisable and evolving approaches are key
 - Building trust between people and mending **self-esteem** issues through a steady transfer of responsibility and continuous exchange are fundamental parts of working with disadvantaged groups in society

SOLIDAR is committed to making lifelong learning a reality for all – by encouraging participation in non-formal and informal learning, especially for those who are far from formal education, with a low income, young adults who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs), school dropouts, and migrants – as well as highly educated unemployed people at the risk of skill deterioration.

In order to reduce inequalities and support the wellbeing of society in general, SOLIDAR proposes a new approach that will unlock the full potential of society – where each citizen's personal contribution is being utilised and skills and competencies are shared and developed. This can be achieved by prioritising non-formal and informal learning, investing in validation to encourage learning and investing in education for social justice.

Introduction

Democratic community learning – the missing piece of the puzzle

In a time when everyone is looking for possible roads towards a European future with less unemployment and more economic and social stability, the education sector is a given starting point. Most commonly, the focus, both from the EU-institutions and from various interest groups, is on matching the skill level within the future workforce with the needs and demands of employers. It is estimated that in 2020, 37% of all available jobs will require a high skill level, normally associated with degrees or certification from formal education. 47% of all jobs are believed to require a medium skill level¹ (the figure for 2011 was 26.6% for higher skills and 46.6% for medium skills). The number of jobs demanding only a low skill level is estimated to decline from 26.6% (2011) to 16%. The natural focus, to tackle this prognosis, is to focus on higher education, in order to quickly raise the skill level within the European workforce.

However, the situation and reality in the midst of the economic crisis is not that easily addressed. Within the European society, certain groups of people are further removed from normative society, making the road to full social, labour market and democratic participation longer and full of obstacles. These groups include young adults who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs), migrants, school drop-outs and people living in exhaustive poverty. It is estimated that close to 120 million people in Europe are already living in poverty – or are exposed to the risk of rapidly falling into poverty². For these people, providing more opportunities for education is not going to be enough: The gap between where they stand and the rest of society is simply too vast. Thus, a new focus on bridging that gap is needed.

Building and nurturing learning societies creates essential assets for change. In areas strongly affected by the crisis, coming together as a community and working towards common goals is a way to fight the social exclusion of unemployment and poverty. Working together, participants can motivate each other and create both inspiration and comfort. In local solutions, with multiple organisations working together – associations, NGOs, civil society and more – a rich fabric of interlocking opportunities and measures can be built, providing a sense of hope and creating possible roads to both employment and further learning and education. It is essential that this piece of the overall puzzle is recognised and acknowledged as a vital part of the educational framework within the Europe 2020 Strategy.

When dealing with marginalised groups, the importance of trust, self-esteem and community is essential. For individuals to start out on the road towards the future, they must first believe in that road – and believe in themselves. **In this briefing we will give examples on how building learning societies through democratic community learning and adult education can help NEETs, migrants, school drop-outs and people in poverty move towards other opportunities and measures designed for employability and education. We believe that learning societies and different forms of non-formal and informal learning define the missing piece of the puzzle in constructing the future of Europe: For employability as well as for social cohesion, self-empowerment and quality of life. Learning societies can be the bridge that closes the socioeconomic gap threatening to rip Europe apart.**

¹ Europe's skill challenge, Briefing note, CEDEFOP, March 2012 http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/9068_en.pdf

² Eurostat, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=751>

NEETs:

In need of opportunities and self-esteem

During the last few years the youth unemployment rate in Europe has increased rapidly, reaching record numbers³. In recent estimates (July 2013) the figure sits firmly at 23.4%⁴, with no signs of declining anytime soon. The labour market is a tough place for a lot of people, at this particular moment in time. Young adults who are neither in employment, education or training – the so-called NEETs – are even further removed, with no distinct openings or opportunities in sight. For many of those who are far from education, a forced commitment to studies in higher education is a leap they are unwilling, or unqualified to take. A prolonged existence without employment, education or training takes its toll on an individual's self-esteem and sense of value. In order to bring the affected closer to new opportunities – measures to build self-esteem, social skills and a general sense of optimism towards the future are needed.

When feelings of doubt and anger are left unaddressed, no one benefits. Frustration can be a reason for vandalism, just as desperation is a reason for crime and violence. When constructing alternatives for channelling such emotions, non-formal and informal learning can be useful. Study circles, open-ended activities and cultural events are examples of measures that can engage energised youngsters and help them on a path that is beneficial for them and for society as a whole. The key is to organise activities together with young people – not just for young people. In learning societies, putting resources and opportunities into a democratic framework – and giving the learners and participants the opportunities to shape and form their own experiences – is part of the learning process.

For the good of society as a whole, it is important to utilise every citizen's skillset and create opportunities for development. It is important for people to re-discover their own talents and skills – and to find ways to believe in their own future. Below we will demonstrate how non-formal and informal learning can support NEETs in finding new opportunities for the future, highlighting an actual example organised by a SOLIDAR member.

Building empowerment is a process with no exact timetable. The European Commission's focus on using adult education to improve basic skills is all well and good – but needs to be accompanied by measures for building social skills in trusting environments, designed to create curiosity and interest towards future opportunities. The means and methods for creating such environments, in society and in the workplace, are not as clearly cut as the stricter framework of formal education. Consequently providers of non-formal and informal learning opportunities need both the means and the resources to construct tailor-made solutions that work in a local context. As seen in the forthcoming example, organisers of non-formal learning have the methodology and skill needed to do so. Being a part of a greater community is it at the workplace or in civil society is helpful in developing personal resources for change.

³ <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2011/72/en/1/EF1172EN.pdf>

⁴ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

Grandmentors

CSV (Community Service Volunteers)

Location: London, UK

Duration: September 2009 - March 2015 (with possible continuation)

Grandmentors is an innovative volunteering programme that delivers inter-generational mentoring that helps young people to find work, stay on in education or take up training. Based on analysis of project management data from recent activities, the mentors in the project have an average age of 61 and consist of a mix of retired, employed and unemployed people. Approximately half the mentees are male and half are female, with an average age of 20. Many are enrolled at college although a substantial number are NEET. A substantial number are asylum seekers.

The youngsters are from inner London boroughs, facing a challenging period in their lives. Mentors assist the young people in various aspects of their lives, from career planning, getting back into mainstream education and/or supporting care leavers to adapting to independent living.

The program provides a positive relationship with an adult – who is there just for them and who wants to help. Many of the young people face barriers to employment or education, such as a lack of positive adult role models. Others need to find their path in life – and some have been in trouble with the police.

Mentoring provides extra support. CSV believes that having an older mentor can make a massive difference in the lives of young people – and the project has been successful at changing the lives of some of those taking part.

Grandmentors help young people to develop a personalised action plan during their first month together, providing a structure to the weekly meetings, and goals to work towards – a regular commitment of at least six months gives the relationship real stability.

Specified target groups:

- Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs)
- Young people leaving local authority care
- Young people who are facing a challenging period in their lives

Pre-determined goals:

- Development of mentee self-efficiency, self-esteem and self-confidence
- Increase chances that mentees find stable employment
- Reduce re-offending or divert mentees away from offending (where they are at risk)
- Helping mentees in finding stable employment

Number of participants:

- 70-80 mentoring relationships

"I am there to listen and support and if necessary, give advice and to facilitate. I'm not a social worker or teacher or one of the other people that a young person might encounter professionally as they grow up – so hopefully the fact that there is no forced agenda may make our meetings more relaxed and allow a space where real feelings can be expressed."

Sarah (56), mentor to Joe, one of the first Grandmentors volunteers,

Evaluation findings (so far):

The Manchester Metropolitan University did an evaluation of the programme in Spring 2013. They concluded that the project delivers valuable outcomes for approximately a third of the young people who are mentored:

- Mentors making very positive contributions to “hard outcomes” such as education, employment or training
- Mentors making a very positive contribution in supporting mentees to develop skills, abilities and confidence
- Mentees value having a generally supportive relationship with their mentors

Methodology and structure:

At the heart of the project is the relationship between mentors and mentees. Mentors provide support to their mentees in areas such as education, training and employment.

Grandmentors support young people in a range of ways including:

- Helping young people set goals
- Support with education and other interests young people have
- Preparation for job applications and interviews
- Help with budgeting

Where relationships become established, meetings typically last about an hour and a half and take place between two and three times a month.

The recruitment and training process for Grandmentors is rigorous and works well. CSV staff conducts all training. On-going training and support is important and valued by mentors.

Initially the recruitment of young people was slow and the programme took a while to get off the ground – but the activities increased during the course of the programme. The majority of young people referred are from the Islington Leaving Care Service, an inner city borough with high levels of deprivation. A close working relationship has been established with Islington Leaving Care Service. A single full-time project manager manages the project and is based at the local authority offices of the Islington Leaving Care Service.

Evidence from interviews and economic analysis suggest that the referral process is resource intensive both for the project and for referral agencies. Time and resources are needed to ‘sell’ the project to the front-line staff that case-manage young people and make referrals.

The Grandmentors programme is supported by a robust research programme run by the Manchester Metropolitan University.

“I want to get myself back on track, learn a trade and live my life. It’s nice to have someone to give you a kick-up the backside every now and then and maybe Sarah can help with this. Mum and dad also think it’s great to have someone extra to help me out. This will be a chance to meet someone entirely different outside of the school system or other youth projects and I’m looking forward to showing Sarah a bit of my world and seeing a bit of hers too.”

Joe (16), looks forward to new opportunities

What makes the project a good example of Learning Societies?

The Grandmentors programme uses mentoring to address a number of needs faced by young adults, in particular those who are NEET and may not have achieved well in mainstream education. Through being matched with a mentor who has experience and time to impart knowledge, the young adults engaged in the programme benefit from support provided by a neutral person. Young adults can seek advice and support from the mentor and thus benefit from the years of experience the mentor (average age is 61) has to offer. Providing employability advice, the mentor can work with the mentee to help them gain the skills, abilities and confidence needed to get onto the career ladder, whether it is through employment, education or training.

In addition to providing mentoring support, the relationship breaks down barriers between generations and is thus beneficial to the community as a whole.

From both qualitative and quantitative research, there are examples of mentors making positive contributions to “hard outcomes” such as education, employment and training as well as “soft outcomes”, including self-confidence and resilience.

At the beginning of the mentoring relationship identifiable goals can be set and progress made towards achieving these. These might not necessarily relate to obtaining employment but can be targets such as improving literacy, etcetera.

The project is also a good example of Learning Societies as it provides person-focused additional support for young people facing a challenging time. The mentoring can positively impact the young adult with associated soft and hard outcomes; the volunteering is beneficial to the individual who at an older age is giving something back to the community by sharing their knowledge, experience and wisdom. The community benefits through the inter-generational relationship – that opens up discussion around preconceptions of different age groups.

More resources:

<http://www.csv.org.uk/volunteering/mentoring-befriending/grandmentors>

<http://csv.org.uk/volunteering/mentoring-befriending/grandmentors/case-study/louise-goodings-mentoring-story>

Migrants:

Fighting prejudices in search of social inclusion

How non-formal and informal learning can promote empowerment?

Looking at the labour market with the added perspective of intersectionalism⁵, one soon discovers that all opportunities are not available for everyone. There is a steep and clear hierarchy in employability that goes far beyond skills and education. People in power tend to recruit and promote within their own networks, meaning the more you vary from the given norm within a certain sector, the less likely you are to be employed. Gender, ethnicity, disability and sexual preferences and identification are all individually common reasons for discrimination. Applying intersectionalism to the labour market means seeing them as intertwined – in order to form a complete picture of the power structures at work.

With this realisation as a starting point, it is clear that some groups are more exposed than others, in terms of employability. Addressing this injustice requires both large-scale measures and local commitment. Fighting xenophobia and prejudices are critical challenges for the future of Europe. For positive change to occur, all levels of society must participate.

On a local level, the sense of hopelessness caused by discrimination requires a more nuanced response. A lot of migrants feel that there is a lack of opportunities – and that they are forever destined for unemployment, constantly living at the brink of poverty. This is a powerful obstacle for individuals to overcome. Working together in community groups and NGOs is one way of empowering each other while seeking new opportunities and acquiring change. On the next page you will find an example of how local community based activities can make a difference.

Joining forces and working together against injustice and oppression is a common thread within the various popular movements of Europe. But community learning and activities can also mean reaching out to other groups in order to find common ground and understanding. There is a lot of potential in the local community, not least in the hotly debated suburbs and urban areas outside of Europe's major cities. Building Learning Societies where NGOs, associations and community groups work together in order to unite marginalised groups – in overcoming prejudices and helping each other by building empowerment – must be a part of the overarching plan for the future of Europe. Non-formal and informal learning provides essential tools for this as great emphasis can be put both on the individual as well as on the collective process. Study circles and community projects are natural platforms for democracy development because cooperation and respect are valued and essential ingredients in order to achieve success.

⁵ Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality, Gabriele Winker, Nina Degele, Hamburg University, University of Freiburg, <http://www.tuhh.de/agentec/winker/pdf/051-066%20EJW-386084.pdf>

Studiecenter för etniska föreningar

ABF Göteborg

Study Centres in cooperation with ethnic associations organized by ABF – Swedish Workers' Educational Association, Gothenburg branch

Location: Gothenburg, Sweden

Duration: 1992 - ongoing

Almost half of the activities reported by ABF Göteborg (The Gothenburg branch of the Swedish Worker's Educational Association) are organised in cooperation with the city's many ethnic associations. ABF Göteborg supports and encourages the associations in their study efforts, with the goal of creating a step-by-step methodology for approaching Swedish society. Many of the associations organise workshops in various social issues and basic subjects such as the Swedish language, English and mathematics. Other activities include dance, music, cooking, crafts and painting.

Being a member of an ethnic association, with your home language and culture in focus, is an important part of integration. The different associations function as both a link to the "old" societies left behind and as a major gateway to the Swedish society and community. The activities are open for everyone, no matter what education level you might have.

In collaboration with several ethnic associations, ABF Göteborg is building a network of outreach officers. Currently some 50 people are actively seeking out people with flaws in the Swedish language. The goal is to enable them to participate in the various activities organised by ABF Göteborg.

Specified target groups:

- Migrants, immigrants

Pre-determined goals:

The ambition is to reach more citizens in areas with a high level of immigrants and to decrease gaps in knowledge as well as strengthening local democracy. It is also important to provide means for the various cultural activities in the associations.

Number of participants:

Close to 100.000 registered participants (not unique individuals) in study circles, cultural activities, events, lectures and other activities in the affected areas of Gothenburg, during 2012.

Evaluation findings (so far):

600 participants have received specific training and have become certified study leaders since the start of the project, now active in training and instructing others. The content of the training include democratic leadership, history of popular movements, history of "folkbildning" (non-formal learning) and its impact on social development.

Methodology and structure:

Study circles, open-ended activities, community learning, lectures, formal courses, community activities, workshops on different social issues, study visits and panel discussions.

What makes the project/activity a good example of Learning Societies?

The idea is to work together with the local community and ethnic associations in building activities and learning environments together with the participants, every step of the way. Giving them access to study rooms and resources and asking different associations to work together and take responsibility for mutual assets creates cooperation and builds new networks. It builds a strong local community where people “learn by doing”, and by getting access to resources and charting their own future – together. By enlisting the help of people from these areas, already engaged in study activities at ABF, the hope is to convince more people to participate in study activities. ABF Göteborg hopes that the outreach program leads not only to more participants in current activities, but also towards a whole new set of activities. ABF Göteborg believes that this will lead to better integration and new opportunities for people living in the suburbs of the city.

More resources:

<http://www.abf.se/goteborg/>

Reza Talebi came to Sweden as a 30-year-old, in 1988. He escaped from Iran in 1983 and lived on the run in different countries, for several years. Reza was politically active. His wife had to go to jail together with his eldest son. Reza then fled. The small municipality of Finnspong in Östergötland became Reza's first home in Sweden, where he studied Swedish and English – and it was here that he stayed while waiting for his residency. Reza's Iranian wife and their two little boys came to Sweden after a year and the family united. The third son was born in Sweden.

“I felt a strong desire to study further”, says Reza, who then applied for studies at the university, to read linguistics. “I chose the university in Gothenburg because there were vacant apartments close by, for my family and me. In 1991 we moved to Hjällbo, a suburb to Gothenburg”.

During the study period Reza began to engage in voluntary work. He rented a laundry room in Hjällbo, where he began to teach his own children and their friends, in their home language. After a short time the activities grew from 4-5 children to 76 participants! Reza contacted ABF to receive further study materials and pedagogical assistance. Soon he was also offering Swedish-society civic courses for adults.

“We had ABF-circles in history, language, music and painting”, remembers Reza. Shortly thereafter, Reza Talebi started working as “immigrant consultant” for ABF. 10 hours per week became 20 hours and in 1995 Reza was permanently employed by ABF, full time. Since 1998, he is responsible for ABF's activities in the northern suburbs of Gothenburg. About 100.000 participants are included in Reza's activities. Approximately half of the population is non-Swedish from the start – with immigrants from Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia and smaller groups from Yugoslavia and Bosnia.

“Between 20 and 30 nationalities are included in our activities and the need for information and knowledge is enormous”, says Reza. **“It's exciting at first with all the different cultures, but very hard after a while – to relate to so many people”**.

Reza has been thinking about what's important when immigrants want to work with and at ABF. **“You have to be interested in public education, social movements, social issues, politics and women's issues”**, says Reza Talebi. **“It is easier to feel committed to the core values of ABF if you have been somewhat active in these issues at home”**.

Language is the next area Reza mentions. He talks about how important it is to dare to use language – to read a lot of fiction, political writings and non-fiction. “It is also incredibly valuable to have supportive people within the organisation, particularly in the beginning”, says Reza. “And when you're new you must dare to ask for help. ABF needs to provide additional support to newcomers. Finally, do not forget the lessons learned from your earlier life”, says Reza. “Be open and honest from the start, when talking to your employer about what you can and can't do”.

Working with different ethnical associations has had international impact too. “The associations are now links to their native countries – for running democracy- and human rights projects in, for example, Bosnia, Macedonia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Serbia and Turkey”, Reza continues.

Reza Talebi is now responsible for several international projects dealing with human rights, development of organisations, democratic leadership, non-formal learning, gender-equality and development of civil society.

Reza concludes: **“In the beginning I was the only person working with immigrants at ABF Göteborg. Today we are 15 people administrating the activities. Although ABF has many immigrants in the ‘operational staff’, we still need new people in our boards and senior management”**, he says.

School drop-outs:

In need of alternative learning styles

How can learning societies bring school drop-outs back into learning?

Currently, 13.5% of men and women aged between 18 and 24 leave school with, at the most, lower secondary education⁶. For this group, labour market opportunities – with all indications pointing towards an increase in demand for a higher skilled workforce in the near future – are already limited and their options and possibilities are shrinking by the minute.

Many European countries offer means of returning to school to complete the basic level needed for low-skill jobs or for applying to higher education. In 2012, the percentage for early school leavers in Europe was 12.7%⁷ – an improvement in reducing the number of school drop-outs, compared to previous years. However – the positive change hides negative trends seen in some of the Member States, where the numbers of school dropouts are still increasing⁸. Clearly the situation is more complicated than simply providing new opportunities for participating in formal education. To truly impact the numbers, new methods and procedures must be added and implemented.

In non-formal adult education there is a long tradition of working with pedagogy for different ways of learning. It is believed that there are at least seven learning styles dictating how different people best go about absorbing and applying information⁹. The three major learning styles are auditory, visual and kinaesthetic. Most people use a combination of these for everything from informal to formal learning. However, we all typically have a preferred learning style and naturally we might also have problems with one of the others¹⁰. What style we prefer is somewhat random but our adolescence and the informal educational environment in the home influence our preferences. In formal education, the visual learning style is the norm. Being able to absorb information through passive means, such as reading and attending lectures, followed by memorising information for a test or a project – is not suitable for everyone. In non-formal and informal learning more focus is put on the kinaesthetic learning style; actually doing something practical in order to learn, often in collaboration and discussion with others, transforms the information to knowledge by linking it to a concrete purpose and result. In a world where jobs requiring higher skills linked to higher education is set to increase, new ways to achieve such qualifications by using other and all learning styles are sorely needed.

There are different ways of achieving this. As studies show¹¹, non-formal learning plays a significant role as a “second (or third) chance education” for those who leave formal education early. Learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning can complement formal education, originating from, for example, voluntary activities that run side by side with the regular curriculum. Students could meet after school to work together, with voluntary tutors or in projects that use other learning styles – but closely following the topic and subject currently in focus in the pupil’s formal education program. Another alternative is to offer

⁶ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/School_enrolment_and_early_leavers_from_education_and_training#Youth_education_attainment_level_and_early_leavers_from_education_and_training

⁷ Eurostat – Labour Force Survey http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-324_en.htm

⁸ Education and Training Monitor 2013, Tackling early school leaving and raising the bar in school education

http://ec.europa.eu/education/documents/eatm/chapter3_en.pdf

⁹ <http://www.learning-styles-online.com/overview/>

¹⁰ <http://www.learningrx.com/types-of-learning-styles-faq.htm>

¹¹ Learning from second chance education: Making use of good practices in second chance education to prevent early school leaving, authored for the European Commission by the Ecorys Consortium.



more non-formal education as a fully-fledged alternative to formal education. Of course this would require the student to validate the results of their non-formal learning. The third alternative is to introduce methods and pedagogy from non-formal learning into formal education. Simply explained – the main focus is to increase the volume of favoured learning styles. A possible way of doing this is by including providers of non-formal education in the planning of formal education.

However, the school drop-outs currently looking for alternatives in the midst of the European financial crisis cannot be left in the cold while we debate the future of various educational systems. Fortunately, non-formal and informal learning – when put in a community setting and applying the ideas and ideals of learning societies – can make a difference right now. Below is an example of how non-formal and informal learning is helping school drop-outs in a still on-going project.

Springboard Alternative Curriculum Programme – CSV Springboard

Location: UK

Duration: ongoing

CSV Springboard has over 30 years of experience delivering Alternative Curriculum programmes to 14-16 year olds across centres working in partnership with local authorities and mainstream schools. Springboard receives referrals from local authorities, schools and other agencies that refer young people who have been excluded from school or are at risk of being excluded. These are the hardest to reach young people.

Some young people have not engaged in mainstream education for months, sometimes years. For many, their literacy and numeracy skills are on a very low level. A number of young people have additional barriers such as learning difficulties, complex home lives or emotional and personal development issues. All of the young people referred to the programme are eligible for free school meals.

CSV Springboard provides “Alternative Curriculum” – delivering nationally accredited courses and qualifications in English, Math and IT along with vocational areas of their choice. All the programmes are under-pinned with wide pastoral support and personalised guidance to ensure that young people are engaged, supported and achieving. Young people benefit from small sized classroom, not exceeding 12 pupils.

The learning the young people receive is focused on getting them “skilled up”, achieving the key qualifications they need to progress – and on building confidence and the resilience required to move onto the career ladder. CSV Springboard aims to raise aspirations and help young people have brighter futures.

In addition to the learning and the personalised support, CSV Springboard works with external partners to deliver counselling to the young people when necessary – anger management workshops, sexual health and sexual violence programmes and drugs and alcohol workshops.

Specified target groups:

- Young people aged 14-16 years who are at risk of being excluded from mainstream education
- Young people aged 14-16 years who have learning difficulties or special education needs and do not perform well in mainstream education

Pre-determined goals:

The Alternative Curriculum is delivered in different CSV Springboard centres. The aim is to equip young people aged 14-16 with basic skills (English, Math and ICT) and vocational qualifications to ensure that when they reach school leaving-age they have the qualifications, skills and confidence to progress into further education, employment or training – and to prevent them from becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training).

Specific targets:

- Young people achieving qualifications in English, Math and ICT
- Young people gaining qualifications in vocational areas
- Improved attendance in education (often a reason to why they are excluded from mainstream education)
- Retention: Keeping young people engaged in education and achieving
- Prevention of young people going into crime/ reduction in criminal activity
- Increased self-esteem and confidence
- Increased resilience

Number of participants:

- Circa 200 young people per year

Evaluation findings (so far):

In London, 2011/2012, CSV Springboard worked with 183 young people (14-16) referred to the Alternative Education programme. 59 % of those who completed the programme progressed into further education or full time training. This is a positive statistic; 39 % of those with no GCSEs are NEET at 16.

Methodology and structure:

- Learning

CSV Springboard has more than 30 years of extensive experience delivering training and education to learners of various abilities. Referred learners have not excelled in mainstream education and face multiple barriers to learning. Many learners have been excluded from school and have already missed a significant amount of basic education by the time they are referred.

Alternative provision covers education at Entry Level and Level One – and offers personalised learning opportunities to help young people reach a level of education that will equip them for further opportunities in education, employment or training. CSV Springboard provides basic skills qualification in English, Math and ICT, and vocational skills and qualifications in areas including beauty, business administration, childcare, construction and media. Learners also gain a qualification in personal and social development (PSD) and receive personalised Information, advice and guidance. All learners are fully supported while they are on the programme and at the time of transition, at school leaving-age.

- Identifying, recruiting and assessing participants

CSV Springboard receives the majority of referrals directly via local authorities, schools and a small percentage of referrals from parents who have heard about the provision. CSV Springboard works with the local authorities and schools prior to engagement and assesses the learner on arrival.

- Person-centred transition planning

Each learner has an individual learning plan that is updated regularly by both the tutor and the learner. Any additional needs will be managed accordingly – all staff made aware of relevant needs and support put in place to ensure the learner can successfully follow the programme. Staff will work with beneficiaries on the transition from “school” to other opportunities in education, training or employment.

- Providing wrap-around holistic support as needed

Small groups, one-to-one support, mentoring, specialist workshops and coaching form the required wrap-around support for the learners.

- Engaging employers and education/training establishments

CSV Springboard has good employer links locally and in addition to providing progression routes, work experience placements can be organised, with employer talks and other employability support.

Springboard’s supportive learning model, with vocational skills and individual-focused “hands-on approach” is effective in ensuring that learners enter and remain in the programme. Staff report to schools on a daily basis and send formal reports regularly to update on the learner’s progress. Staff also works closely with the family/carer and should any issue arise, such as truancy, the family can be notified immediately and a plan can be put in place.

What makes the project/activity a good example of Learning Societies?

The Alternative Curriculum provision is an important and necessary programme for young people who have been excluded from mainstream school or who are at risk of exclusion. The Alternative Curriculum that CSV Springboard provides is aimed at preventing young people becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) at school leaving-age.

Through the offer of more interactive and alternative learning with personalised support, young people of this age group are more likely to be engaged, attend and achieve. For example, studying towards work-focused vocational qualifications such as construction works well for young people who do not excel in classroom based activities. The small classroom size and the support each learner receives is critical to their development and the more informal environment at CSV Springboard is conducive to their learning.

Young people aged 14-16 years who have not been achieving or who do not engage with mainstream education are unlikely to achieve the learning and skills they need to progress. Also, if literacy and numeracy levels are remarkably low by the age of 14-16, one of the key factors is that mainstream education has not worked effectively for them and therefore an alternative learning programme is required. It is important to provide this alternative learning to young people who would otherwise become NEET – and to ensure they move on to sustainable opportunities and have brighter futures.

More resources:

<http://csv.org.uk/learning/alternative-curriculum-programmes>



Meet Daniel

Daniel was referred to the CSV Springboard 14-16 Alternative Education programme when he was 15 years old. Unlike many of the young people who attend the programme, he was not removed from mainstream secondary education as a result of behaviour issues. Instead, he had simply become disengaged from the school curriculum and the school environment to the point where he stopped attending completely.

Daniel also faced challenging issues in his home environment. When he was 10, his father left the family home. His mother had a serious drinking problem, which by the time Daniel joined CSV Springboard, had worsened to the point where she was sometimes not able to look after him properly.

The agreed Alternative Curriculum programme undertaken by Daniel at CSV Springboard had two main targets:

- To provide him with a curriculum of learning that would engage him
- To provide him with the personal, social and emotional support he needed

For his vocational option, Daniel chose to undertake construction – something that had always interested him. He rapidly showed that he had an aptitude for this vocational area and made very good progress through the foundation qualification, before moving to the next level. He also attended and worked hard in English, Math and ICT classes. This was quite a contrast to his non-attendance at these subjects when he was in mainstream school. It was quite clear that he thrived on the higher level of support he received in a classroom setting where there were smaller numbers of learners and he received a high level of individual attention from the tutor.

While attending CSV Springboard, Daniel was supported in dealing with the challenges in his home environment. CSV Springboard worked closely with Children's Social Services in ensuring that he and his mother accessed the council's Family Support provision. This enabled Daniel to receive help with clothing and footwear at times when his mother was not in a position to buy them. The family support programme also sought to support Daniel's mother in taking the steps that she needed in order to deal with the drinking problem. Daniel's key worker at Springboard provided him with mentoring and personal support, particularly when he sometimes became depressed and discouraged due to the challenges of his domestic environment.

Over the year and a half that Daniel was at CSV Springboard, there were plenty of challenges – but he completed his course with over 90 % attendance and achieved a craft level qualification in construction. He also achieved pass grades in his English and Math. Since then he has progressed to an employed apprenticeship.

People facing poverty

Validating informal skills and building community learning

It is estimated that more than 120 million people are living in or at the brink of poverty within the European Union¹². Changing this trend is at the core of the Europe 2020 strategy, aiming to bring a minimum of 20 million people out of poverty in the coming six years.

Learning is at the centre of this massive undertaking, but the focus is placed firmly on higher education and vocational training. Learning is not exclusively individual, meaning there are forms of learning that are best done collectively, with shared goals and shared efforts. A prolonged period of economic turmoil takes its toll on the population of any given country or area. Tension builds as families and communities see no indication of improvement. As poverty spreads, violence and crime follow. In the face of desperation it is vital to focus not only on higher education but also on the social environments dictating the mental health and attitudes of people affected by the crisis. It is easy to lose one's sense of purpose or be hit with self-doubt and depression when in long-term unemployment and/or poverty. All the educational efforts and opportunities in the world won't change that fundamental truth: The structures of society, with gaps in income and class as well as discrimination based on prejudices and xenophobia, creates a sense of hopelessness that affect how individuals look at the world and themselves. Without tackling that, all the measures for employability and higher education will be in vain.

In civil society, as well as in manual jobs, there is a lot of non-formal and informal learning occurring with learning outcomes that are not recognised anywhere else. In times of stability, there is no great need to address this – as people will stay with one employer or move around in a local context where their skills are immediately recognised. Moving forward certified skills and competencies are becoming increasingly important. For people who are currently in unemployment, the possibility of having their skills and competencies recognized, validated and assessed – and at later stage certified – becomes a vital opportunity. There are people who have developed skills throughout their voluntary engagement within associations and in the local community, while others have continued to evolve and learn professionally, by gradually improving themselves as part of their jobs. Faced with losing their employment and provision due to the crisis – they are often left hanging with no proof of their improved skills and knowledge.

New educational opportunities are important but it's not the only recipe for fighting the crisis and getting people out of poverty and into employment. For many, proper recognition of what they have already learnt in informal ways would be enough to qualify them for new jobs and opportunities. This is why validation must be a big part of the Europe 2020 strategy. Providers of Adult Education are well equipped for this challenge, already dealing with different learning styles and methodology. Working in learning societies, uncertified skills can be identified and, eventually validated and recognised.

Too often the discussion on validation is centred on how to certify skills acquired in non-formal education and by informal learning – against a framework built on formal education. Equally important – and essential for starting the process – is the undertaking of getting people to see and believe in their own skills to begin with. In a society where higher education is becoming the norm for employability, it is not given that unemployed people with a low level of formal education will spontaneously start to analyse and

¹² <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=751>



sort through the informal learning that has occurred throughout their lives. In fact, it is more likely that long time unemployment will affect their self-image in negative ways. A platform is needed – where people certified to validate skills can operate in a trusting environment and work through the whole process of recognising skills, starting with how the affected individual views informal learning and their own progress. On the following page you will find an example from SOLIDAR member CEMEA, designed to do just that.

Creating a wide and varied fabric of organisations and providers in areas strongly affected by the on-going crisis, with possibilities leading towards either employment or further education, is essential for bringing Europe into the future. Learning together in the local community and integrating ways to recognise and validate skills by working with providers of non-formal and informal learning is the potential starting point.

La santé communautaire

Service action sociale Ville de Seclin

Health Community

Location: Ville de Seclin, France

Duration: On-going

Seclin is a town of 13 000 inhabitants situated in the north of France, near the well-known town Lille. This city is composed of four big districts and one of those is the suburb of “La Mouchonnière”.

La santé communautaire is a community project for health and self-esteem. The project involves local representatives – such as social workers and healthcare workers – and the various inhabitants of “La Mouchonnière”.

The objective of the project is to develop synergy between competencies, linking professional healthcare workers to the inhabitants of La Mouchonnière in a way that encourages dialogue and citizen participation. The main activity is a workshop focused on drama and theatre, exploring the concept of self-esteem. The workshop is organised by a professional actress.

The activities of La santé communautaire are based on active involvement from the local population as they work together to identify mutual problems and then strive to solve them by working together, utilising both individual talents and the collective resources available in the environment around them.

Using drama and theatre to achieve this sets the project apart from other available measures and projects. Questions are turned into discussions – and finally short plays – and it all starts with whatever issues the community want to address.

Specified target groups:

- People living under poor and precarious conditions
- Long-time unemployed
- People not in contact with the health services
- Others who show an interest (the workshop is open to everyone and provides a way for people to meet and embrace diversity)

Pre-determined goals:

- To promote and create a healthy and positive mutual vision surrounding health issues and self-esteem
- Empowering inhabitants with tools to control their own lives through social participation and collaboration with others
- Recognising the skills of individuals through local networks and cooperation designed for people to help each other
- To encourage further collaboration and new projects in the local community

Number of participants:

- Currently there are 90 people enrolled in drama/theatre workshops

Evaluation findings (so far):

- People who get involved in the activities tend to commit to the project
- The participants rapidly develop new listening skills, and become better at working with others
- The participants become more vocal and able to express themselves, for instance giving presentations in front of others

- By taking an active part in organising activities and structuring the project, the participant's organisational skills are strengthened
- The project provides opportunities for people with different social backgrounds to interact, creating mutual understanding, thus counteracting prejudices and xenophobia
- As professional health providers also take part in the workshops, all participants enjoy new views on the relation between service providers and citizens

Methodology and structure:

- "Dynamic group exercises" and peer learning
- Sharing and exploring various (and sometimes hidden) competencies within the group
- Intercultural learning
- Creating new context for people with different social backgrounds to interact, using theatre and drama as "common ground" to start the process
- Drama/theatre exercises
- Focusing on self-esteem and self-image
- Active participation

All participants get to be involved in every part of the project, from planning to organising. A mutual timetable is used, outlining individual responsibilities. This strengthens responsible planning and creates proof that the participants are able to work well with others and follow through.

What makes the project/activity a good example of Learning Societies?

La santé communautaire is based on the idea of seeing and appreciating each and every individual participant for what he or she can bring to the table – with the overarching goal of then creating ways to work together as a group and as a community. With a common interest (the drama/theatre workshops) as the first stepping-stone, the group builds a creative environment with respect and acknowledgement for individual needs and traits. From there, a bridge is created to the rest of society, as health care workers and other professionals are brought on board as equal participants in the workshops.

On a whole, the project provides new opportunities for open minded exchanges, ultimately transforming the local community into a more open and democratic place to live, populated by people who believe in themselves and in what they can achieve when working together with others.

More resources:

<http://cemea.asso.fr>

Mötesplats 2020 – Meeting Place 2020, Sweden

ABF – The Swedish Worker's Educational Association: different branches, and other civil society organisations

Location: different cities in Sweden

Duration: First phase; 2011-2014

The aim of the project is to set up nine local “meeting places” in order to develop methodology and activities for vulnerable groups in Sweden – and offer popular education and cultural activities in order to improve the participant's opportunities for a more structured life; creating opportunities for education and emphasising vocational skills in order to strengthen employability.

Specified target groups:

- People living in or at the brink of poverty
- Long-time unemployed
- People with drug addictions
- People “stuck” in the social security system
- Immigrants struggling to gain access to Swedish society

Pre-determined goals:

There are specific goals due to ESF-funding. Additionally, together with the Linköping University, the project aims to research and examine how non-formal and informal learning can help bring people from poverty to a decent life and into employment.

Number of participants:

The project is currently in a development phase.

Methodology and structure:

Lectures, discussions, networking, seminars with officials and politicians, social entrepreneurship training, study circles and cultural activities.

The methodology that is incorporated in the project is based on “participatory action learning methods” – where the participants define their curriculum and together with, for instance, a study circle leader, plan the activities.

What makes the project/activity a good example of Learning Societies?

The idea behind the project is basically to build learning societies using ideas and pedagogy from non-formal and informal learning. The project is included here as it shows that the idea of learning societies can indeed be the starting point when building projects and taking measures for social inclusion.

More resources:

<http://www.abf.se>

Recommendations

The social situation within the European Union is severely affected by the economic crisis:

- 120 million people live in or at the brink of poverty
 - 24 million people are working poor
 - 25 million people are unemployed (5.5 million of them are youngsters)
 - 3.9 million young people are NEET (young adults neither in employment, education or training)
 - 77 million people have, at most, lower secondary education
-

The Europe 2020 targets declare that this must all change during the next six years:

- At least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion
 - Reduce the rate for school drop-outs to under 10 %
 - Reach a 75 % employment level for the age group of 20-64
 - At least 15 % participation in lifelong learning for/by adults
-

In order to reach the Europe 2020 goals and in order to counteract the social challenges outlined above, SOLIDAR and members work together to promote the **Building Learning Societies** approach; where people are empowered by participating in society and where people find new opportunities for employment through non-formal and informal learning.

To better support and target the specified groups outlined in this briefing (young adults who are neither in education, employment or training – so called NEETs – migrants, school drop-outs and people in or at the brink of poverty, as well as highly educated unemployed people at the risk of skills deterioration) SOLIDAR recommends the following actions:

1. Develop a comprehensive strategy in order to actively support the creation of Learning Societies and learning workplaces, with consideration given to social and economic developments
2. Within the framework of the European Semester Process, take concrete steps towards better access to education and training by proposing measures that promote participation in lifelong learning
3. Recognise the added value of non-formal and informal learning for developing skills – skills needed to bridge the gap between the needs of the labour market and the available qualifications within the potential workforce
4. Promote the recognition of skills, competencies and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning within society and at the workplace – and promote a common understanding among different stakeholders
5. Work to set up national validation mechanisms, by 2018, for recognising the learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning that enable the empowerment and participation of the most vulnerable.

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6. Guarantee equal access to quality public education and training – especially non-formal and informal learning – without discrimination based on cultural, national or social origin or sexual preference/identity
 7. Promote intercultural dialogue and intercultural learning as a way of promoting active inclusion and social cohesion
 8. Develop measures for fighting unemployment and for supporting young adults who are neither in employment, education or training (NEETs), by offering inclusive labour market opportunities – including lifelong learning as a given part of any and all labour market policies
 9. Increase financial resources for promoting lifelong learning for all – and allocate specific funds for non-formal and informal learning addressing social justice
 10. Create “learner friendly environments” that meet all learning needs and learning styles, giving special attention to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups – in order to achieve active inclusion and social cohesion

SOLIDAR believes that the approach of **Building Learning Societies** can greatly contribute to overcoming the challenges currently facing Europe. But even with no economic crisis to combat, SOLIDAR believes that life-long learning, community initiatives and democratic initiatives form the core for human development and fulfilment. Simply put, Learning Societies can help solve the crisis, but it is also a reason for doing so – because a society where we are free to learn and grow throughout our lives is one worth fighting for.