Meeting report for the Capacity Building Working Group

‘Navigating Polarised Narratives’

October, 2026 11:00-12:45 CET



Participants

- Catalonia, Spain: Júlia Ramos Barrufet, Isabelle Torallas / Lafede
- France: Jocelyne Delarue, Marie-Alexia Delerue / RESACOOP
- Finland: Anni Vihriälä, Mika Niskanen / Fingo
- Germany: David Koepfer / EWNT Eine Welt Netzwerk Thüringen e.V.
- Germany/Dominic Stucker, Martin Fielko / Collective Leadership Institute
- Netherlands: ErnstJan Stroes / Wilde Ganzen
- Poland: Dominika Zaręba, Milena Ślósarz / Fundusz Partnerstwa/Partnership Fund
- Wales, UK/Uganda: Julian Rosser, Jalia Packwood / Hub Cymru Africa

Meeting Summary

The Capacity Building Working Group met to discuss how to navigate polarizing narratives affecting citizen initiatives for global solidarity across Europe. Participants shared experiences from their organizations and countries, including challenges with hate speech, conspiracy theories, and political polarization affecting development cooperation funding and operations. Participants discussed responses including inquiry-based approaches rather than advocacy, educational programs, and community engagement strategies. The group explored various tools and approaches including intergenerational dialogue, and focusing on commonalities rather than differences, with particular attention to maintaining democratic practices and supporting local democracy initiatives.

Act of Love or Kindness Check In

The meeting began with a check-in round in which Dominic Stucker invited participants to share an example of an act of love or kindness they had experienced or witnessed.

Participants shared a variety of examples from their personal lives and professional experiences, including meaningful connections with younger generations, support received at work and during project implementation, and numerous examples of community solidarity and professional collaboration.

Introduction of the topic of the meeting "Navigating Polarizing Narratives"

Dominic Stucker, the co-moderator of the meeting, presented the main topic of the discussion and introduced questions, while Dominika Zaręba, co-chair of the meeting, declared to make notes with the support of ErnstJan Stroes, representing the Secretariat of the CIGS Network.

Participants were asked to focus on sharing about considering the following questions:

1. How is your organisation / country experiencing polarising narratives and which themes are most prominent?
2. What tools and approaches are you using to respond to misinformation, strengthen trust, and promote constructive dialogue?
3. Which good practices or additional resources can you share, particularly in relation to citizen initiatives in global solidarity and capacity building?

Then, Dominic opened the discussion.

Bringing People Together rather than Dividing Them, Germany

Martin Fielko from Collective Leadership Institute discussed the challenges facing citizen initiatives in Germany, particularly from far-right influences and questioning of their legitimacy and outlined a new online training program called "Bringing People Together rather than Dividing Them" (in German: Vermitteln statt Spalten) focused on dialogic process facilitation and conflict resolution. The context is about the fact that polarization is a worldwide phenomenon that is not exclusive to Germany or Europe. In many conversations and concrete actions that we see today, it is a challenge that there is not enough time taken to get everybody heard. In polarized conversations, it takes courage to insist on all voices being heard. A key skill to have this courage is dialogic process facilitation, listening to other' opinions and not judging people who have different opinion from our own. The program teaches techniques for inquiry-based dialogue rather than advocacy. Martin also mentioned future plans to collaborate with CRISP – Crisis Simulation for Peace to develop AI tools for depolarization and conflict resolution.

→ https://collectiveleadership.de/project/germany-bringing-people-together-rather-than-dividing-them

Addressing Political Polarization in Finland

Anni Vihriälä from Fingo discussed polarisation in Finland, noting the growing political divide, the normalisation of racism, and attacks on organisations working in development cooperation. She identified global justice, sustainable development, and gender issues as key themes that need to be addressed when tackling polarising narratives.

Anni highlighted Fingo's efforts to address these challenges through global citizenship education, the World Village Festival, which provides a space for people from different backgrounds and with different opinions to meet, exchange perspectives, and challenge stereotypes, as well as through a magazine that explores these issues. She emphasised the importance of intergenerational and cross-community dialogue in navigating polarised times and fostering greater mutual understanding and social cohesion.

→ Festival: https://maailmakylassa.fi/en/in-english/

→ Magazine: https://maailmankuvalehti.fi/2026/vain-verkossa/yhteiskunta-ja-talous/kysyimme-kohun-keskelle-joutuneen-itakeskuksen-peruskoulun-oppilailta-mita-heista-tuli/

Deep Canvasing in the Netherlands

ErnstJan Stroes from Wilde Ganzen, who also represents the Secretariat of the European Network for CIGS, explained that Wilde Ganzen is not so much affected by polarisation because it does not rely on government funding so nobody can revoke their funding. However, he mentioned receiving angry phone calls regarding their funding for the Global South of people who think there is much poverty in the Netherlands. He also discussed the organisation's work with local citizen initiatives addressing migration and polarisation. Recently they organised a workshop Deep Canvassing. According to ErnstJan, the main issues driving polarisation in the country are migration and climate change. He mentioned that on the recent annual meeting of Wilde Ganzen they organised a workshop on

He also highlighted a toolkit on how to maintain democracy under authoritarian pressure and raised an important question: How can we safeguard democracy in these challenging times?

→ Deep Canvassing https://deepcanvassing.nl

→ Democracy toolkit: https://antiauthoritarian.com

Combating Far-Right Hate in Catalonia

Júlia Ramos Barrufet from Lafede told that organisations in Catalonia are facing hate messages and attacks, particularly those working on feminism and anti-racism. She gave the example of the migration crisis in Ceuta earlier this year, which generated numerous polarising narratives, as well as the use of violent rhetoric by members of the military.

Júlia described threats to cut development cooperation funding if right-wing parties win upcoming elections in Catalonia and Spain, highlighting her organisation's dependence on government funding. She also noted the growing presence of far-right movements, including fascist ideas and the revival of Franco-era nostalgia, among young people.

Júlia outlined a collective strategy being implemented by Lafede to counter the rise of the far right, focusing on social needs and access to material resources rather than engaging primarily with hate speech. The organisation is also participating in a broader strategy at the Spanish state level and will host a public event in November to challenge polarising narratives.

→ https://www.lafede.cat/en/

Discussion on Polarisation in Social Media and Politics in Poland and Germany

The group discussed polarisation and hate speech on social media. Milena Ślósarz from Fundusz Partnerstwa highlighted the importance of remaining calm and adopting a mindset of inquiry rather than advocacy when engaging in debates. She also mentioned Spiral Dynamics as a framework for better understanding some of these processes.

David Koepfer from EWNT (Eine Welt Netzwerk Thüringen e.V.), Germany, shared insights into polarisation in Germany, noting how extremist parties and "entrepreneurs of polarisation" are contributing to the erosion of compromise in political discourse, as well as undermining a fundamental understanding of democracy and sustainable development.

He emphasised the need for genuine spaces for public discourse, where people can meet in person, feel safe, and discuss important issues openly. He also pointed out that, when seeking compromise, it is important to distinguish between people who are willing to cooperate and those who are not. Hate speech, he observed, often receives far more attention than it deserves.

The discussion concluded with questions about how to address hate speech effectively and engage with people who remain open to dialogue, rather than focusing exclusively on the extreme views expressed by a minority.

Addressing Political Polarization Strategies in Wales, UK

Julian Rosser from Hub Cymru shared insights into the rise of far-right movements, growing fear of outsiders, and the challenges of promoting progressive initiatives, even in the context of a supportive government. He also raised an important question: when should we actively challenge fake news and polarising narratives, and when is it better to ignore them and focus on communicating facts? This highlighted the ongoing dilemma of when to "fight", when to ignore, and when to seek dialogue.

Julian discussed strategies for countering polarisation, including publicly demonstrating solidarity, engaging in dialogue, and highlighting the positive local impacts of global solidarity projects. He also pointed to numerous good-practice examples of educational activities promoting global development, sustainable development, and global citizenship. One example is the "Million Acts of Hope" initiative, which coordinates messages highlighting positive developments and inspiring actions across society.

Finally, the discussion emphasised the importance of focusing on conflict resolution and supporting leaders who work towards peacebuilding.

→ https://togetherwithrefugees.org.uk/a-million-acts-of-hope/

Working with local communities, France

Jocelyne Delarue from RESACOOP, France, suggested involving local authorities and influential figures to communicate the benefits of global solidarity more effectively and to share concrete examples of achievements in global development and cooperation.

She highlighted successful capacity-building projects involving local governments and communities across France, where experiences and knowledge were shared directly by local communities.

She observed that when these issues are discussed with communities from a political perspective, people may seem uninterested. However, when conversations draw on their personal experiences, people are often able to share numerous stories and positive examples of citizen engagement in global solidarity.

Linking European and African perspective

Jalia Packwood, who works for Hub Cymru in Wales and comes from Ghana, emphasised the importance of using factual information and carefully crafted questions to engage people in dialogue about interconnected global issues.

She raised an important question: Why should Europe support the Global South, and why does Africa matter to Europe, including from an economic and environmental perspective? She encouraged participants to reflect on everyday products, such as the coffee or chocolate we enjoy for breakfast, by asking where they come from and who produces them.

Jalia pointed out that polarising narratives often originate in the political landscape. She stressed the need to help people understand how interconnected the world is and how environmental conditions in Africa can influence the situation in Europe. She called for greater global solidarity in addressing environmental and social challenges.

Building on Jalia's remarks, Dominika Zaręba from Fundusz Partnerstwa, Poland, added that Europe also has much to learn from African experiences, particularly in environmental protection and conservation. She highlighted the many examples of good practice in biodiversity conservation, emphasising that protecting biodiversity is essential for prosperity and well-being worldwide.

Polarising Narratives in Central and Eastern Europe and Final Conclusions

Dominic Stucker invited Dominika Zaręba, who was responsible for taking notes, to share some final observations. Dominika explained that she would contribute additional reflections from a Central and Eastern European perspective, which she had prepared for inclusion in the meeting minutes.

In Poland, the main themes underlying polarising narratives include the war in Ukraine, migration and refugees, climate and environmental policies (particularly the European Green Deal), and the European Union, especially the tension between EU values and conservative and nationalist narratives. From the perspective of Fundusz Partnerstwa (Environmental Partnership), it is important to address the relationship between environmental protection, climate change, and global development education.

One good-practice example is the ongoing Partnership Academy, an educational programme for civil society leaders in Poland, including women and young people. The programme is based on tools and methodologies for strengthening civil society, building partnerships, fostering trust, and promoting participatory approaches.

Dominika also shared an example from an environmental training session she conducted recently in the small village of Lanckorona, involving young people aged 14 and NGO leaders. She was impressed by the young participants' critical thinking and strong observational skills. However, she noted that young people often lack a sense of agency: decision-makers and adults do not always listen to their voices, even though they will bear significant

responsibility for the planet's future. She also observed that these young people seemed more resilient to manipulation and polarising narratives concerning environmental issues.

The example highlighted the importance of empowering young people, strengthening critical thinking, and creating meaningful opportunities for their participation in decision-making. These approaches can help build resilience to polarisation and misinformation while encouraging constructive engagement with environmental and global challenges.

→ Partnership Academy: https://www.funduszpartnerstwa.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/PartnershipAcademy.pdf

Some conclusions from the discussion

- Focusing on positive messages: in some cases, it may be more effective to avoid amplifying polarising narratives and instead focus on communicating facts, positive outcomes, and good practices, using AI tools for fact checking.
- Promoting dialogue and mutual understanding: Encouraging dialogue, understanding different perspectives within society, strengthening relationships, and building people's skills and capacities can help reinforce the social fabric.
- Recognising grassroots initiatives: Acknowledging and supporting the contributions of grassroots and community-based initiatives.
- Linking education with agency: Connecting education with opportunities for action, including the ability to implement and finance small-scale community projects.
- Investing in community leadership: Supporting the development of community leaders, particularly women and younger generations.
- Engaging influential local figures: Involving trusted and influential people at the local level to communicate the benefits of global solidarity.
- Connecting local initiatives with wider networks: Building links between local initiatives and European and international networks to encourage cooperation, exchange experiences, and share good practices.

Next Meeting

The group agreed on next steps, including finding new co-chairs for the working group and planning the next meeting, which will focus on the theme of democracy and its link to citizenship organizations. **The next meeting is: Thursday, 18 March from 11:00-12:30 CET with the main discussion topic proposed by ErnstJan Stroes on "How to operate on democracy axis".**

Prepared by: Dominika Zareba, Dominic Stucker, ErnstJan Stroes, October 2026.