

Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid in Europe

Article by Chiara Milan, Dagmar Diesner, Mariema Faye, Sergio Ruiz Cayuela, Thorsten Mehnert

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As governments instructed their populations to stay at home to contain the virus, networks of solidarity went into operation across Europe and the world. Volunteers performed different services: from delivering food and medication to providing emotional support, childcare, and legal counselling. Known as “mutual aid” – a term borrowed from anarchist thinking on reciprocity and cooperation – the motivation behind these initiatives cuts across political traditions to lie in community. While some are run by existing groups, others were created by volunteers responding to emergency needs amid the pandemic.

This stubborn solidarity has been a saving grace for response measures ill-equipped to reach, or blind to, certain sections of the population. Even before the pandemic, some countries were relying on food bank referrals to avoid providing real social protection. Mutual aid thus holds up a mirror to the welfare state and the damage done by austerity. At the same time, it shows that welfare is only not granted from above. The foundations for the national welfare state were laid by the cooperative societies, mutual funds, and credit unions of the 19th century. In bringing communities together in new ways, mutual aid initiatives prefigure possibilities for transformation in the 21st century. The *Green European Journal* spoke to organisers about their activities during the pandemic.

The Western Balkans Route’s No Name Kitchen – Chiara Milan

The closure of borders and travel restrictions enacted due to the coronavirus outbreak were heavily enforced in the Western Balkan countries. Local and international volunteers active along the Western Balkans route found themselves unable to continue providing direct support to people on the move. After years of finding different means of offering first aid, clothes, and hot meals to migrants crossing the former Yugoslavia countries, the volunteers of No Name Kitchen (NNK) and other grassroots groups were forced to adapt their strategies to the changing circumstances. Unable to “bring food to people”, especially to those sleeping rough and in makeshift camps, due to inaccessible official transit and reception centres, they decided “to bring people to food”.

During the most dramatic period of the pandemic, when almost all international volunteers found themselves forced to leave transit countries, the NNK opted for distributing online vouchers that migrants could exchange for food items at local shops and bakeries the group had previously been in contact with. They termed this mutual aid action “solidarity market”, a means that allowed grassroots groups to provide food to about 500 people a week and support the local economy.

Other groups followed at NNK’s heels. Using social media networks, these groups reached out to people in need and provided them with coupons that could be spent at the local markets of the most important nodes on the migratory path, most notably the border between Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia. This solidarity market has allowed volunteers and activists to continue reaching out to people on the move despite not being physically present in the field.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected our social and political life in many ways. The pandemic, in addition to its political and social consequences, has considerably altered the context in which grassroots social movements mobilise and organise. To volunteers and activists supporting people on the Western Balkans route, travel restrictions and lockdowns further complicated their activities. At the same time, the restriction measures provided them with the incentive to adapt to a rapidly changing context by developing new tools for mobilisation and reformulating their interventions. With those tools, they were able to continue their activities despite the unfavourable circumstances. Even amid a crisis, new activist and solidarity networks are arising and existing ones have grown stronger.

Food Sovereignty In Northern Italy – Dagmar Diesner

CampiAperti is located in Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy – a region famous for its vast agricultural outputs of cheese, wine, vinegar, ham, fruits, and pasta, of which only 5 per cent is certified as organic. This skewed situation led to the formation of CampiAperti, an association composed of about 80 small and medium-scale producers and farmers who decided to take back the economy, production, and nature through self-governing their own markets and production.

In adapting food sovereignty principles (in contrast to food security), producers and farmers of CampiAperti exercise complete autonomy over their production and distribution systems. Their farming practices follow sustainable agroecological methods to generate a food system composed of producers and customers alike.

During the pandemic, Bologna City Council closed down all CampiAperti markets immediately, even though supermarkets and food shops could remain open. The lockdown in Emilia-Romagna, which had the second-highest case count in Italy after Lombardy, was heavily enforced by police with cameras capturing licence plates and helicopters in the air controlling public spaces and roads from above. This constrained the space for developing a solidarity structure that would allow CampiAperti's producers to stay economically afloat.

The producers geared up for a direct confrontation with the city council. They organised a virtual protest with the slogan “Defend solidarity, and not the virus!”, asking people to join from balconies and gardens and share their individual protests on a collective platform. Two weeks after the petition, three markets were given permission to re-open but under strict social distancing conditions. That meant the markets could only operate as a collection point for produce.

Only customers officially associated with the association were allowed to go to the markets. CampiAperti's painstaking efforts to build up a direct relationship with its customers for years paid off. When the association made an online call to their customers to join officially, member rates shot up. CampiAperti's producers compiled a list of products (vegetables, fruits, cheese, wine, beer, herbal products, and cosmetics) at their markets and posted a summary online. Customers had to place their orders online and producers coordinated the processing and preparation of orders among themselves. This arrangement worked very well and many customers introduced their families and friends to the markets. The pandemic has crystallised the importance of the producer-customer relationship and, in particular, the need for common responsibility in local food systems beyond the Covid-19 crisis.

Naples' Struggle for Migrant Rights – Mariema Faye

The Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli started in 2016 as a grassroots initiative responding to the abysmal conditions in many reception centres. It monitors the situation on the ground and offers support where it can. Many migrants do not receive proper medical care, so we set up a walk-in clinic. Because of the bureaucratic hurdles that

migrants face, the movement offers legal assistance. In the last few years, we've supported almost 7000 people confronted by obstacles to receiving a residency permit.

Before the pandemic, we were already gearing up for an intense year. In 2018, the Salvini government removed the humanitarian visa status for migrants, a change which promised to cut many people off in 2020. Then Covid-19 happened. A material crisis coincided with many migrants being left without papers. From our social centre, we set up a mutual aid network offering food and other essentials to migrants and local families and, at the same time, we kept our legal support open online and by phone. But our movement isn't only about assistance, it's political. In Italy, the pandemic caused labour shortages in certain sectors.

At the height of the crisis, there was even talk of sending people receiving unemployment benefit to work in the fields. The Italian government's answer was one of its periodic amnesties for people working in the black economy. In Italy, it is estimated that over 670 000 migrants work without contracts nor protection from exploitation. So far, 207 000 people have applied for amnesty, but we still don't know how many will be accepted. The amnesty is limited to sectors suffering from labour shortages because of the pandemic, notably in the care and agricultural sectors, as well as to workers earning a qualifying wage. An exploited migrant worker in the logistics sector has no recourse. The message is clear: you are only useful to the Italian state if you do a certain job.

Our movement is not at all convinced by this amnesty. We're in a health crisis and yet part of the population is left without access to rights and healthcare. The responsibility for safe and legal working conditions should rest with employers, not workers, and the Italian government should properly enforce and strengthen existing legislation that protects migrants from exploitation. Our movement demonstrated in the streets and took the cases of workers excluded from the amnesty to the district attorney of Naples.

Our legal team has put forward an alternative proposal based on an initial one-year residency permit which would be open to all. In a global pandemic, making rights conditional on work is an assault on the basic right to life. Still, we're not waiting for solidarity from the Italian government. We start from a different principle. Change starts from below. We lived through the health crisis, the quarantine, and the job losses. We know what working on the black is like. The change will come from us.

An Alternative Economy for Birmingham – Sergio Ruiz Cayuela

Cooperation Birmingham was envisioned in late 2019 by a group of people involved in community groups and workers' and housing cooperatives. Our ambition is to become an active partnership between cooperatives and commons, expanding autonomous commoning experiences in Birmingham while promoting local economic democracy.

We planned to build a network, develop our model in a participatory way, and gradually begin activities over 2020. But Covid-19 changed everything. Birmingham is a city chronically struck by food poverty. Seeing the upsurge of solidarity with the pandemic, we felt the urge to act. In March 2020, we started a solidarity kitchen, a self-organised effort to deliver healthy and hearty warm meals people in need or self-isolation. Between March and August, we delivered over 20 000 meals, relying on donations, support from cooperatives, and the voluntary work of over 200 participants.

The solidarity kitchen was framed as a mutual aid project, although looking back, we were only partially successful. Decision-making was made in open online assemblies, all participants were encouraged to attend, and the minutes were made public on an online forum where anyone could raise discussions. The kitchen crew and drivers always received a meal in exchange for their work. However, we mostly failed in involving recipients in the solidarity kitchen. We also had limited success in involving occasional participants in decision-making. Social

distancing, in not allowing the face-to-face interactions that are crucial for building trust, was certainly to blame. However, we also could have done more to explain the project's political values and encourage greater involvement.

The question now is: where do we go from here? In light of the economic crisis, how can we create a sustainable structure based on principles of commoning and mutual aid so that local communities have the means to support themselves? We are in a transitional period in Cooperation Birmingham. My personal vision (shared with other members) is that we should focus on food sovereignty to create an agroecological food network bringing together organic producers, workers' cooperatives, and vulnerable communities. Our aim is to gradually increase our autonomy by including food production activities and building infrastructure within communities. In this way, we can provide alternative sources of healthy food for those who need it most and encourage practices of food provision based on solidarity, cooperation, and direct democracy.

Our vision involves three groups of actors. First, community gardens and individual allotments. We want to team up with existing community gardens and also create new ones to provide organic, locally grown food and reduce dependence on donations. Second, the lively network of local workers' cooperatives. Many of them are already involved, and they can provide the infrastructure needed for food distribution and preparation. Last but not least, local communities. Our aim is to build community power by creating an alternative solidarity and gift economy around food in Birmingham. To create a structure truly based on mutual aid, we need to involve the consumers in Cooperation Birmingham and create equitable ways of accessing food which do not exclude those in food poverty.

Self-Organised Solidarity in Leipzig – Thorsten Mehnert

Stiftung Ecken wecken's initiative during Covid-19 was motivated by the idea of not leaving people alone in a crisis situation. At the same time, we wanted to strengthen neighbourhoods in Leipzig and enable citizens to actively support and shape where they live. To this end, we adopted an existing license-free software system to connect people with their neighbours who may be older, living with disabilities, single parents, or essential workers in need of help. Volunteers assist with grocery shopping, run errands, go dog walking, chat on the phone, provide childcare, or perform small repairs.

Within a short time, more than 1100 individuals had registered in Leipzig and offered to help others nearby. The software matched those in need with registered helpers close to their residence, often within a 100-metre radius. Initially, volunteers carried out approximately 250 jobs. However, many of them started shopping or dog walking on a regular basis. So these services probably amounted to many hundreds of interactions leading to growing social cohesion and solidarity.

We are convinced that the banks of knowledge and expertise among citizens make citizen-led support much more targeted and effective than those initiated by the authorities. But these services could be even more effective if local government and civil society provided them in a coordinated and co-productive manner alongside health authorities and social services. We are currently exploring opportunities to export our system to other cities.

In order to provide such support services on a long-term basis, local self-organisation is essential. This requires functioning networks, places of (physical and virtual) encounter, communication systems, and web applications. Appropriate formats of self-organisation must be invented and developed as a whole. They are not only necessary for the provision of assistance in crisis situations but to shaping neighbourhoods in general. Governments and authorities need to understand that in order to create resilient communities, they should take much greater notice and make use of the services provided by citizens for citizens. They should strongly promote the development of self-organising structures and link them to municipal services wherever possible.



Chiara Milan is Marie Skłodowska- Curie fellow at the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz. She is the author of *Social mobilization beyond ethnicity. Civic Activism and Grassroots Movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2020, Routledge).



Dagmar Diesner is a doctoral student at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University. As permaculturalist, she co-founded a community organisation to advocate on ecological and health issues.



Mariema Faye is an activist with the anti-racist organisation Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli.



Sergio Ruiz Cayuela is a member of Cooperation Birmingham, Plan C, and other self-organised community groups. He is also a PhD fellow at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University studying the expansion of the commons as a post- capitalist form of social organisation.



Thorsten Mehnert is a management consultant, carpenter, and board member of Stiftung Ecken wecken in Leipzig. He works closely with many local actors from civil society, local government, and politics to develop future- oriented solutions to urban challenges.

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