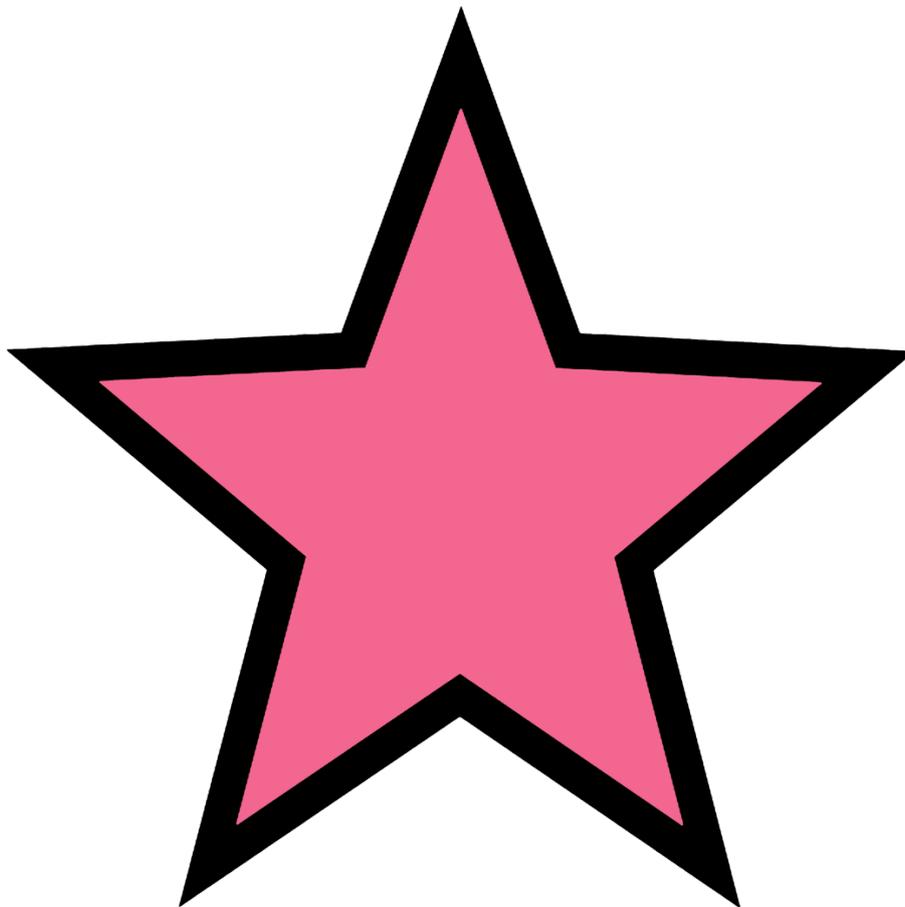


Nordisk Ungdomsorganisation / Nordic Youth Organisation



Northern Bridges - A Guide for youth NGOs Addressing Polarisation



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Northern Bridges - A Guide for youth NGOs Addressing Polarisation



Nordic Youth Organisation (NordYouth) works in 2021 and 2022 on the framework theme “Building bridges for the future”. As part of this, NordYouth has in 2021 looked back at the history of the last 75 years, to find out what has united and divided people, as well as found out that polarisation means, and how NGOs can take action to address it. In 2022 NordYouth will get to more specific actions by working on strengthening relations of different kind, between people and between institutions, also that to build bridges in the society. This guide is based on our 2021 work in general, and specifically on outcomes of the seminar Northern Bridges held in September 2021 in Tallinn, Estonia. Our studies might not be fully scientific, but it is based on the view of approximately 20 youth NGOs and can therefore be useful resource material also for other NGOs.

Why NordYouth addresses polarisation

At NordYouth young people choose the topics our organisation should address. These are topics that we consider important for the society. Polarisation has during recent years become a serious concern as it is shattering, dividing and weakening the society. Therefore, we suggested NordYouth to address polarisation. The NordYouth leadership also saw in youth NGOs a great, and partly unused, potential to address polarisation. What we mean with unused potential is that the youth NGOs are in direct contact with young people, but since many NGOs focus on a rather narrow area (for example culture, sports, nature, human rights) they gather young people who think alike. By some adjustments in the regular activities the youth NGOs could contribute more towards uniting societies. To contribute to uniting societies might feel distant for many NGO leaders, but as civil society organisations it is our responsibility to help fostering critical thinking, tolerance and understanding, regardless what the main activities of the NGOs are.

The initiative to address polarisation was given first, and after that we formed the 2021-2022 framework theme “Building bridges for the future” and developed activities directly about addressing polarisation and other supporting activities. Our aim is that NordYouth and its members, partners and contacts contribute to a more united, inclusive and peaceful society. This guide is one of the resource materials we produce on this topic.

Our definition of polarisation

Social polarisation is the segregation within a society that emerges when factors, such as economic inequality, political opinions, cultural expression and life situation, result in differentiation of social groups.

Our understanding of the background and current situation of polarisation

We in NordYouth consider it especially important to address polarisation right now, because of the current European society context. A long row of challenges, such as financial crisis, wars in neighbouring regions, refugee flows and now most recently the COVID-19 pandemic, have fuelled polarisation in our society. These challenges have put people in financial difficulties, have caused death and health problems, and caused unsafe conditions -so the loss and the fear has resulted in society instability. The instability divides people of different reasons;

- Some people are first hand affected by the challenges (for example have become unemployed, have lost close ones in Covid-19) while others are very little affected or even experienced positive financial outcomes.
- People are informed to various degree and by different sources (some also by fake news), and process the information in different ways, and respond emotionally to it in different ways. So, the outcome is that the society become more polarised along with a row of challenges, and these have continued for many years now. However, polarisation is nothing new. In the societies we have always had people in different economic situation, political opinion, cultural expression or other differencing views, and the gap between these vary from one society to another. A general trend is anyway that the challenges the last 15 years, in combination with that people now have instant access to online information, and fake news, and interact online, have polarised the society more than before.



Society models

When learning about polarisation we visualised three society situations:

- In the “crosscutting society” different people are mixed and interacting.
- In the “fragmented society” different people still interact but form groupings with those that are alike.

- In the “polarised society” the groupings with different view are totally separate and do not interact.

This visualisation helped us to identify in what situation our societies are. It was brought up that societies can be more polarised regarding one topic and less regarding other, but if one topic divide people very strongly, it can make it difficult to interact also regarding other topics.

Current polarising topics

During the Northern Bridges seminar we identified what topics, in our experience, polarise our societies. The participants were mainly from northern Europe, but some had background in southern Europe, so the experiences come from our home communities.

Polarisation due to different approaches to Covid-19

At the time when this guide is written, in autumn 2021, it is nearly two years since the Covid-19 virus started to spread and the pandemic is still ongoing. The virus has affected everyone’s lifestyle for a long time, and how to deal with it has clearly divided the population.



Climate crises

By climate crisis we mean the current climate change and its consequences. There is polarisation on this topic on many levels, from recognition of its existence to how to handle it.

Polarisation related to handling bigger migration waves

What we mean with migration is the action of moving permanently from one country to another. Migration has happened in all times, as people has always moved according to living conditions and work opportunities. Migration is necessary for the function of the society, but how to handle bigger migration waves, for example due to humanitarian crises in neighbouring areas, divide the population in the receiving country. By this headline we do not address migration itself, but the polarisation caused by that people have different opinions about how to handle the migration situation.

Polarisation due to unsuccessful integration

At this headline we want to address how unsuccessful integration of immigrants may lead to polarisation. It has to do with that if immigrants and the rest of the population do not interact enough in daily situations where they continue living in their own bubbles with people like themselves. That means that they do not get to see the other person’s point of view, and opinions easily get polarised.



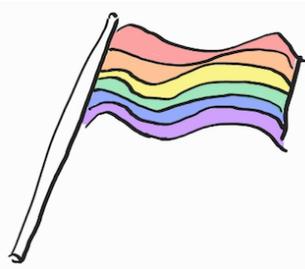
Socio-economic polarisation

Social and economic grounds polarises to varying degree depending on how segregated the society classes are. The Nordics and Baltics can be considered one of the most equal socio-economic regions in the world, but the differences in life style and opportunities are still tangible, and these differences may cause polarised opinions about nearly any topic.

Age polarisation

Age does not necessary cause polarisation, but people’s experiences and competences do to some degree differ depending on when they were born, and they have different needs depending on the age. Thereby, age does not directly polarised, but opinions and needs coming with age often does.

Recognition and rights for gender and sexual orientation minorities



There are big differences between the countries' legislation and practice to what extent gender and sexual orientation minorities are recognised and having rights. In liberal countries people of all genders and all sexual orientations have the same legal rights, and in others it is illegal to step outside the norm of man, woman and heterosexuality. The law reflects to far extent how polarised the topic is; in a liberal country the topic is less polarised and in a conservative more, but it is not the whole truth. Gender and sexuality are so deep in humans that lacking recognition and conflicting opinions exists also in liberal countries, which causes discriminating approach towards the minorities, and polarisation between people.

Abortion

The two sides of this polarised topic are that some people are against abortion because it means ending of a life, while others are of the opinion that it is up to the woman to decide as the foetus grow in her and affects her life. This is a topic that is more polarising in some countries, and less in others. For example in Sweden abortion is clearly legal and the majority of the population supports it, while in Poland the population's opinion is divided and abortion is legal only in limited cases.

There are of course so many more topics that polarise people, but we chose these as they are all present in our countries and wanted to work on them as a base for how our NGOs can bridge the gap between people.

Suggested NGO actions for addressing polarisation

At this chapter we return to the polarising topics we chose, and bring forward our suggestions for how youth NGOs can address them. Before going to the specific topics we share a few points that are common for addressing any polarising topic.

Inclusion

One first step is to welcome young people to the NGO, regardless of his/her/their view/opinion/situation. Only by being inclusive it is possible to open interaction between different people. Sometimes it is not enough to be passively inclusive, but the NGO needs to market itself to target groups that are less represented in its membership, or reach out directly to specific individuals. Additionally it is important to cater for many different needs the young people may have. NordYouth has inclusion guidelines, and these can be further consulted, and are available as another module of the Dynamo course.

Interaction, facilitated discussion and mediating conflicts

In many situations interaction might come naturally between people of different views/opinions/backgrounds on polarising topics. NGOs are especially good forums for this, as polarising topics can be discussed while doing common activities in the NGO. However, in some cases youth workers need to step in to support the interaction. Often it is enough with just facilitation of the discussion, and here it is important to give all parts time to speak, and to steer the discussion towards, not necessary a common agreement, but understanding of each other's point of view. In other cases a more profound mediation of conflict is needed. At NordYouth we have tried out a tool for this, and it is also described in a separate Dynamo module.

Next we continue with our suggestions for how NGOs can address the specific topics of polarisation that we have identified.

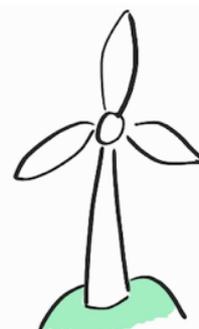
Polarisation due to different approaches to Covid-19

Youth NGOs can address polarisation due to different Covid-19 approaches in various ways:

- Provide information sources that give true facts about the virus
- Facilitate workshops on media literacy, and there also identify fake news regarding Covid-19
- Youth workers discussing one-to-one with youngsters about how they have experienced the pandemic, and what possibly have made them believe in fake news.

Climate crises

Most NGOs represented at our Northern Bridges seminar have during recent years provided educational activities about ecological sustainable living and circular economy, as well as awareness about the climate crisis in general. This is nowadays not a topic only for NGOs primary addressing the climate crisis, but for all. NGOs also plan their activities so they are as sustainable as possible. What was suggested for this point is to give increased visibility to the sustainability actions the NGOs already do, to inspire others and increase the society pressure to for more climate friendly decision making.



Polarisation related to handling bigger migration waves

This is a topic (as well as other topics related to human rights at risk) that might require facilitation by youth workers if young people in the NGO are of different opinion. It would be good if the youth workers are keeping up to date with trustable news, and reflect on these from the perspective of human rights, and the perspective of the young target group in the NGO. In a facilitated discussion with the young people it is important to talk about the youngsters' feelings behind the opinions, support the young people to find actual facts and help them to see the situation both from the migrants' perspective, and from the perspective of opponents in the discussion.

Polarisation due to unsuccessful integration

At this topic youth NGOs' task is to increase the interaction between immigrant youth and other young people. Our recommendation is to let the interaction happen naturally, while doing another activity, like cooking/baking, hiking, picking berries/mushrooms, organising a society event, doing sports etc. The challenging part is, in our opinion, is to form a mixed group including both immigrant youth and other youth. A good practice we have used is to cooperate with other NGOs or a municipality having the target group we are missing.

Socio-economic polarisation

A key for NGOs to address socio-economic polarisation is to offer its activities for free or for a very low fee, and set the location of the activities so that it is reachable for young people living in different areas.

Age polarisation

Even if youth organisations' activities should be mainly by and for young people, some activities can with advantage be for all ages. A good idea is that youth NGOs can invite other NGOs/companies/municipalities to together do something good for the society, for example tidy up a park or organise a secondhand sales. In that way people from different generations learn about each other's way of thinking, while doing the tasks.

Recognition and rights for gender and sexual orientation minorities

Youth NGOs can be a visible role model for gender mainstreaming, by communicating about gender as a scale and treat everyone equally everyone regardless of gender and sexual orientation. If youth NGOs want to go one step further, they can for example campaign in social media for gender mainstreaming.

Abortion

This is a sensitive topic, but youth NGOs can support young people in understanding what abortion means physically, from human rights perspective, from religious perspectives and how it is a political topic. NGOs can with advantage invite specialists of these areas to run sessions, but ensure the discussion is kept in balance and without violating human rights views. NGOs can also support young people to find information about birth control options and family planning.

Conclusions



The conclusions our group at Northern Bridges had was that youth NGOs have endless opportunities to address polarising topics, and have an especially good position as we are in direct contact with people from many different backgrounds, opinions and views. The aim is not to make us all agree, but to learn to see topics from other people's perspective, respect each other, and when needed find solutions that does not reduce anyone's human rights.

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