

A large, semi-circular graphic in the background shows three paper cutouts of people holding hands in a circle. The cutouts are in shades of brown and white. A white circle is partially visible on the left side of the graphic.

Mutual **Learning Toolkit**

Bridging Borders – Skills Exchange Symposium (WP7)



Developing connections of solidarity within the EU

Mutual Learning Toolkit

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Toolkit

This Mutual Learning Toolkit was developed within the framework of the **Bridging Borders** project, under Work Package 7: Skills Exchange Symposium – Encouraging mutual learning and understanding between EU citizens and people with a migration background.

This toolkit captures and systematises the **good practices, learning methods, and policy recommendations** that emerged during the event. It translates the experience of the Skills Exchange Symposium into a transferable resource for organisations, youth workers, educators, policymakers, and civil society actors seeking to foster inclusive and dialogue-driven spaces.

Rather than presenting theoretical assumptions, this document is grounded in practice. It reflects what was implemented, observed, discussed, and identified collectively by participants throughout the event.

1.2 Context: Skills Exchange Symposium

The Bridging Borders Skills Exchange Symposium brought together participants from diverse social, cultural, and national backgrounds in an open and participatory environment. A central element of the event was the recognition that meaningful dialogue around solidarity and inclusion can only take place when people are given space to speak for themselves. For this reason, the programme included a dedicated session centred on participants' voices, where individuals from different backgrounds were invited to share personal experiences, challenges, and reflections.

This session was not framed as a testimonial exercise, but as a collective learning moment. By listening to lived experiences directly, participants were able to move beyond abstract discussions and engage with the concrete realities shaping people's lives. This approach laid the foundation for mutual learning, trust-building, and deeper understanding throughout the event.

2. Mutual learning approach

2.1 Methodology of Toolkit development

This toolkit was developed following the implementation of the Skills Exchange Symposium through a structured process that included:

Review of session outcomes and facilitation notes

Analysis of participant feedback and reflection exercises

Identification of recurring themes across discussions

Synthesis of practices that demonstrated strong engagement and impact

The content presented does not represent pre-designed conclusions. Instead, it reflects patterns and insights that emerged organically during the event.

Particular attention was given to distinguishing between:

Methods
intentionally designed in advance

Practices
that evolved dynamically during discussions

Recommendations
voiced directly by participants

This approach ensures that the toolkit accurately represents the lived experience of the event.



2.2 Understanding mutual learning in practice

Within the Bridging Borders framework, mutual learning was understood as a horizontal and reciprocal process. Knowledge was not transmitted from experts to passive audiences but co-created through dialogue, exchange, and reflection.

Participants contributed actively by drawing on personal experiences, professional expertise, and social realities. This approach challenged traditional hierarchies frequently present in discussions on migration and inclusion, placing lived experience on equal footing with institutional or academic perspectives.

The event demonstrated that mutual learning requires intentional facilitation and structural design to ensure balanced participation.



2.3 Creating conditions for meaningful exchange

Several conditions proved essential for enabling effective mutual learning. **Facilitated discussions** ensured that all participants had the opportunity to contribute, while **clear community guidelines** supported respectful listening and constructive dialogue. Sensitive topics were approached carefully, allowing space for disagreement without confrontation.

Importantly, the **use of non-stigmatising language** helped shift the focus from labels to experiences. Participants were not defined by legal status or background, but by their perspectives, ideas, and willingness to engage. This significantly contributed to participants feeling safe, respected, and motivated to take part in the discussions.

3. Good practices identified during the event

3.1 Moving beyond institutional narratives: Centring lived experience

Public events addressing migration, inclusion, and social cohesion are often structured around panels dominated by institutional stakeholders and expert speakers. While such formats can provide important information, they frequently focus on describing existing initiatives, policy achievements, or organisational activities, without sufficiently addressing the lived realities and grassroots challenges experienced by affected communities.

During the Bridging Borders Skills Exchange Symposium, a deliberate effort was made to move beyond this traditional format. The panel discussions were intentionally designed to include a diverse composition of speakers, including representatives of grassroots organisations, NGO practitioners, people with migrant backgrounds, and institutional stakeholders. This ensured that lived experience was not positioned as an afterthought, but as a central and equal component of the dialogue.

Participants with migrant backgrounds and representatives working directly at community level were invited to openly share both positive experiences and the more difficult, and at times harsh, realities they encounter in areas such as access to employment, education, administrative procedures, and social inclusion. This contributed to grounding the discussion in real-life conditions rather than abstract policy discourse.

In addition, the questions addressed to institutional and policy representatives were carefully formulated to go beyond the presentation of positive developments or successful initiatives. Panel moderators encouraged reflection on persistent structural challenges, implementation gaps, and areas requiring further attention. This approach created space for honest exchange and critical reflection, shifting the focus from political storytelling to lived realities and shared responsibility.

By prioritising experience over rhetoric, the event fostered a more authentic and meaningful discussion. Participants reported that this approach allowed them to better understand systemic issues and recognise the complexity of inclusion processes.

3.2 Intercultural dialogue through facilitated discussion

A second key practice identified during the event was the structured facilitation of intercultural dialogue in mixed groups. Migrants, EU citizens, NGO representatives, and institutional stakeholders were not only invited to share their perspectives but were actively encouraged to engage in exchange and collective reflection.

Participants with different backgrounds were given space to present their realities, including both opportunities and challenges, and to respond to one another in a moderated environment. This created a setting where diverse experiences could be acknowledged without competition or hierarchy.

Facilitators ensured:

Balanced participation across groups

Respectful listening and constructive engagement

Careful handling of sensitive or potentially polarising topics

Importantly, the discussions did not stop at experience-sharing. Participants were invited to reflect collectively on possible solutions and contribute to the co-creation of policy and practice recommendations. This transformed dialogue into a participatory process rather than a one-directional exchange.

The co-creative dimension of the discussions strengthened participants' sense of ownership and reinforced the principle that policy dialogue should not occur in isolation from the communities it affects. The interaction between institutional actors and individuals with lived experience created a more grounded and nuanced understanding of both challenges and potential responses.

4. Learning methods applied

4.1 Storytelling as a tool for mutual understanding

Storytelling emerged as a powerful learning method throughout the festival. Personal narratives enabled participants to connect emotionally with issues that are often discussed in abstract or politicised terms. By grounding discussions in real experiences, storytelling helped humanise complex social realities and facilitated deeper engagement.



4.2 Small-group discussions and collective reflection

The use of **small-group** formats allowed participants to engage more openly and reflect more deeply on the topics discussed. These sessions encouraged dialogue across differences and supported the identification of shared values and concerns. Collective reflection moments helped consolidate learning, enabling participants to articulate what they had learned and how their perspectives had evolved.



4.3 Spatial arrangement as a tool for equality and dialogue

The physical arrangement of the space during the discussions with community members was deliberately designed to support equality and participation. Rather than placing speakers on a stage or behind a podium, all participants arranged their chairs in a semi-circular formation, facing one another.

This spatial setup removed traditional hierarchies between speakers and listeners and encouraged interaction on equal terms. By allowing participants to see each other and engage directly, the arrangement fostered a sense of shared presence and mutual respect. As a result, participants reported feeling equal to one another in the discussion process, which contributed to a more open, inclusive, and balanced exchange of perspectives.

5. Key Learnings from Participants

Based on feedback and discussions, participants highlighted:

The importance of **being listened to**, not represented by others

The value of **meeting people** beyond labels and assumptions

A stronger sense of **shared responsibility** for inclusive societies

Increased confidence to engage in civic and social dialogue



6. Policy and practice recommendations

Based on the learning outcomes of the Bridging Borders Skills Exchange Symposium, several recommendations emerged for policymakers, civil society organisations, and practitioners working in the fields of inclusion, youth engagement, and social cohesion.

Embed lived experience in dialogue-based initiatives

Initiatives addressing inclusion and solidarity should actively centre the voices of people with lived experience, recognising them as key contributors to learning processes rather than as passive beneficiaries. This approach enhances relevance, credibility, and mutual understanding.

Support youth-led and co-created spaces for civic engagement.

Providing young people with the opportunity to co-design and actively shape dialogue spaces strengthens their sense of ownership, increases engagement, and contributes to the development of inclusive and democratic participation practices.

Adopt participatory and facilitated formats for sensitive topics.

When engaging with complex or polarising social issues, structured facilitation and participatory methods are essential to ensure balanced participation, respectful exchange, and meaningful dialogue across differences.

Invest in sustained dialogue rather than one-off events.

Long-term and recurring dialogue opportunities allow trust to develop over time, deepen mutual understanding, and support more lasting social impact compared to isolated or short-term initiatives.

7. Conclusion

The Bridging Borders experience demonstrated that meaningful mutual learning emerges when people are given space, trust, and appropriate tools to share their realities. Throughout the Skills Exchange Symposium, participants engaged in dialogue that moved beyond formal discussion and into genuine exchange, allowing diverse perspectives to be heard, recognised, and reflected upon.

The learning processes observed during the event showed that mutual understanding cannot be imposed through top-down approaches. Instead, it develops through carefully designed participatory formats that value lived experience, encourage equality among participants, and create conditions for respectful and open dialogue. By combining storytelling, facilitated small-group discussions, collective reflection, and an intentional spatial arrangement, the event fostered an environment where participants could engage on equal terms and co-create knowledge.

This toolkit captures these insights in order to support the replication and adaptation of inclusive, dialogue-driven practices across different local contexts in Europe. While the specific experiences shared during the Bridging Borders Festival were shaped by the participants and setting, the underlying principles identified—such as participation, trust, and recognition—are transferable and relevant across diverse communities.

By offering concrete learning methods and practice-based recommendations, the toolkit contributes to ongoing efforts to strengthen civic engagement, social cohesion, and intercultural dialogue. It aims to support organisations and practitioners in designing initiatives that not only address diversity and inclusion as policy objectives, but also embed them in everyday practice through meaningful human interaction.

