

**IVCO**  
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## IVCO 2024 THINK PIECE

# TO BUILD A BRIDGE THAT UNITES US, AND WITHSTANDS THE STORM

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**Comhlámh**  
GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Located on the western coast of Norway, with a long history of building bridges that can endure winter storms, the Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec) draws from our country's history to create ways of working which are designed to withstand turbulent times. This can be observed in the everyday working relationships we build between people from different parts of the world, using intercultural communication and mutual learning built on respect, trust and dialogue. The relationships and partnerships that we support aim to foster understanding of differences and contribute to collaborative solutions to common problems.

Living and working in a different country can provoke a new understanding of values. Those who have had the opportunity to live abroad have often reflected deeply on how they perceive the world. Understanding diversity in religion or power dynamics in different places can give a unique ability to build respect for differences. Yearly, Norec, an entity under the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, funds about 180 partners who work together in over 70 different projects to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since 2000, Norec has been supporting partnerships through North to South and South to North exchanges across borders, with around 15,000 young people enabled to work and live in Norway and abroad.

Global instability and geopolitical tensions are increasing. More countries are now dominated by autocratic and sectarian leaders, and we see several failing or unstable democracies. This instability is concerning for Norec, particularly given its impacts in some of the countries where we work. Norec's second largest theme of work is aligned to SDG16, "Peace, justice and strong institutions". To support this, Norec works to reduce political instability and tensions by promoting peaceful and inclusive societies in over 30 different countries.

Over the years, we have observed that the partnerships that thrive are those built on trust and respect.<sup>1</sup> Relations built in unfamiliar contexts, such as bonds that emerge from hosting staff from other countries, demand more from us. Cross-cultural partnerships must overcome differences and require us to understand and accept the beliefs and worldviews behind those differences. This gives the partnerships particular strength. In times of need, these partnerships can inspire courage in one another, but also share verified, solid information about the situation facing partners in need and conflict.

A knowledge exchange project in Lebanon, supported by the Norwegian government, illustrates Norec's approach to learning and emphasis on two-way learning. Youth and other stakeholders in Lebanon reported a lack of trust between citizens and the government, along with fatigue with the current political regime. Youth representatives from a Norwegian political party's youth wing worked together with youth representatives from various Lebanese political parties. Through training modules, visits and discussions, they achieved valuable learning outcomes to build unity and cooperation. The Lebanese youth representatives noted that it was important for them to experience the respectful and collegial cross-party cooperation that exists between Norwegian representatives, and were encouraged by seeing the young age at which Norwegian youth representatives can hold important party positions.

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[1] Norec (2022). *Partnership – just another buzzword?*

An evaluation carried out in 2023 found that the project successfully promotes dialogue, contributing to tolerance and cooperation. Most Norwegian respondents (75%) identified the biggest impact of the project to be the dialogue between both countries.<sup>2</sup>

Bridging differences is extremely challenging. A key lesson from the partnerships that Norec supports is that partnership is a process that evolves over time. Project duration, long-term commitment and personal relationships are crucial in this process.<sup>3</sup> Although the COVID-19 pandemic was described by partners as a major challenge, particularly due to travel restrictions, it also led to an interesting development: an increase in communication skills among the partnerships we support. In the first phase of the pandemic, partners were forced to hold more frequent meetings to assess the health and safety situation for staff hosted in countries affected differently by the pandemic. In the second phase, most partnerships did not send out staff, leading them to identify new digital working methods and virtual means to share knowledge. The increase in meetings not only strengthened relationships but also diminished cultural differences in the virtual meeting room.<sup>4</sup>

Personal relations and everyday contact, established through the exchange of people and knowledge, can build new knowledge. Sometimes this knowledge can be used to develop common solutions. In other times, knowledge created in a partnership between different continents addresses distinct problems which require different solutions. The intercultural dialogue embedded in these cross-border partnerships strengthens and supports bonds between people and organisations. With long-term commitment, these relationships can and will grow. As the pandemic has shown, distance can also create stronger partnerships if we find space and time to nurture our relationships. Working with people from other parts of the world challenges our realities, differences in wealth, and self-understanding. These relationships reinforce mutual respect and help to avoid conflict. For us it is imperative that the exchange of knowledge and personnel must be a two-way learning system. Everyone must be able to share their knowledge and be open to receiving it. By challenging our inherited beliefs and values, we can foster understanding and unity among people from different parts of the world. These are strong bridges that can withstand the storm.

[2] Olofsson, K. (2023). *Youth Political Empowerment Programme*.

[3] Norec (2022). *Partnership – just another buzzword?*

[4] Norec (2024). *Full or semi-digitalisation – what did we achieve while the world was in lockdown?*

## About the Authors



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Jan Olav Baarøy is since 2018 the Director of Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec). He has previously served as the head of programmes in Norwegian Church Aid, the Norwegian Peace Corps, and for CARE International Norway. Baarøy started his professional career in UNICEF Uganda, followed by six years in UNICEF New York and Tanzania. He holds an MBA in Strategic Leadership and an M.Phil in Social Anthropology with studies from Uganda where he was associated with Makerere University.



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Kari Lindemann has been a Senior Advisor in Norec since 2018. She is currently working in Norec's section for knowledge and learning. She has previously worked in Tanzania for the International Organisations for Migration and Norwegian Church Aid. Kari Lindemann holds a Master's in International Education from New York University and has worked several years for inclusive education in the Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund.

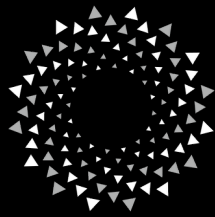


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