

[Without solidarity where would you be now? Civil society against COVID](#)



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This time last year, the health services of the Italian city of Bergamo were sinking under the burden of COVID-19, recalls EESC member **Giuseppe Guerini**, when the NGO *Emergency* stepped in to manage a field hospital set up to cope with the huge influx of patients. As we hear from medical director **Oliviero Valoti**, their help was providential.

This life-saving role in the crisis has earned *Emergency* the EESC Civil Solidarity Prize. EESC Vice-President **Cillian Lohan** explains the philosophy behind this one-off award while *Emergency* president **Rossella Miccio** tells us what recognition from Europe means to her organisation.

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Editorial



You are never too small or too big to help!

Dear readers,

Wow! I am still touched by the emotion of the prize winners of our Civil Solidarity Prize this year.

I co-hosted the award ceremony on 15 February in front of a live audience of 7 500 people. The news of the recognition by the EESC of these great initiatives soon spread all over Europe.

And the winners were only the tip of the iceberg. All of the 250 applications we received bore testimony to the fantastic solidarity that had been and is still being shown by many in the face of COVID-19. The prize-winning projects are a snapshot of what is happening on the ground, of the immense efforts undertaken by countless organisations and individuals to help those in need, even saving lives or just helping people cope with the hardships caused by the pandemic. It shows that our many communities really are the heart of Europe.

As for their content, the projects ranged from those providing in-kind support, such as delivering food and assistance to the elderly or the homeless, to people making protective medical material for doctors, medical staff or maternity wards, to projects taking place entirely online, such as looking after the mental health of teenagers or of anyone in need, battling COVID-related fake news, helping children with special educational needs and their parents to continue with schooling and therapy when all schools shut down, organising certifiable courses on everything you need to know on COVID-19 or simply organising balcony concerts to boost morale during the first lockdowns. And that is just a sample!

The winning projects prove you are never too small or too big to help – they ranged from initiatives launched by an 18-year-old high school pupil to large-scale operations undertaken by an international NGO that is a seasoned crisis healthcare provider active on different continents.

Look at what can be achieved when we tap into that sense of civil responsibility, that compassion, and that consideration for our neighbours.

The EESC's goal was to acknowledge the contribution made by Europe's civil society to overcoming this crisis and the vital role it played. We wanted to show those people working on the ground that Europe is thankful for their commitment and their solidarity. We decided to address that with a prize.

We hope our prize will not just prove to be an incentive to our winners, but will also serve as an inspiration for all other

organisations and individuals to continue with their incredible acts of solidarity, as what they do is crucial to winning the battle against the pandemic and to building a better future for Europe. We were therefore very proud and humbled to celebrate this moment with some of these incredible people;

We would also like you to get to know these brave and creative people and their work better. In this issue you can read interviews with each of our winners who, among other things, told us what prompted them to launch their projects and how these were received by their direct beneficiaries. You can also listen to the podcast with our winner in the cross-border category - Emergency, an NGO which built a hospital in Bergamo when this Italian city was the coronavirus hotspot in the early days of the pandemic. And here are also some fun facts for those who want to find out more. Enjoy the read!

Cillian Lohan

EESC vice-president for communications

In short

[Watch the 2020 Civil Solidarity Prize ceremony](#)

Watch the video of the award ceremony for our Civil Solidarity Prize and learn about 23 amazing projects that helped us get through the crisis.

[Civil Solidarity Prize 2020 in the media](#)



Here is a bunch of headlines which have appeared in the media to date about the Civil Solidarity Prize 2020.

Austria - Wiener Zeitung: "[Österreichische Initiative gegen Fake News ausgezeichnet](#)"

Belgium - De Standaard: "[Europa bekroont Poolse \(17\) die fake webshop tegen partnergeweld opzette](#)"

Bulgaria - Plovdiv24.bg: "[Карин дом" печели наградата на ЕИСК за гражданска солидарност за България](#)"

Croatia - Hina: "[Hrvatska mreža za beskućnike dobitnica prestižne europske nagrade](#)"

Cyprus - Cyprus Times: "[Το βραβείο Αλληλεγγύης Πολιτών της ΕΟΚΕ για τους Κύπριους εθελοντές, χαιρετίζει ο Επίτροπος Εθελοντισμού](#)"

France - Touteurope.eu: "[La plateforme française "Bouge ton Coq" récompensée par le Comité économique et social européen](#)"

Germany - Deutsche Welle: "[Walczą z pandemią: sklep dla ofiar przemocy i psycholog przez Whatsapp](#)"

Greece - Globalview.gr: "[Ο ΟΡΓΑΝΙΣΜΟΣ STEPS ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ ΝΙΚΗΤΗΣ ΤΟΥ ΒΡΑΒΕΙΟΥ ΑΛΛΗΛΕΓΓΥΗΣ ΤΩΝ ΠΟΛΙΤΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΕΟΚΕ](#)"

Hungary - Euronews - HU: "[Unió elismerés a Magyar Helsinki Bizottságnak](#)"

Ireland - The Irish Journal: "[Alison wins EESC prize for Covid-19 info course](#)"

Italy - La Repubblica: "[Emergency vince il premio europeo per la solidarietà civile: assegnato per il suo modello flessibile e replicabile nel gestire ospedali](#)"

Lithuania - Delfi.lt: "[Komunikacijos ekspertei Karolina Barišauskienei – tarptautinis apdovanojimas už projektą „priešakinėse linijose“](#)"

Malta - Times of Malta: "[Chamber of SMEs wins prize for helping businesses during pandemic](#)"

Poland - RMF 24: "[Licealistka z Polski z prestiżową nagrodą. Jej inicjatywa wspiera ofiary przemocy domowej](#)"

Portugal - Público: "[Covid-19: projecto Vizinhos à Janela distinguido com prémio Solidariedade Civil](#)"

Romania - Euractiv.ro: "[Asociația Prematurilor câștigă Premiul CESE pentru solidaritate civilă acordat României](#)"

Slovakia - Aktuality: "[Organizácia Človek v ohrození získala medzinárodnú cenu za občiansku solidaritu](#)"

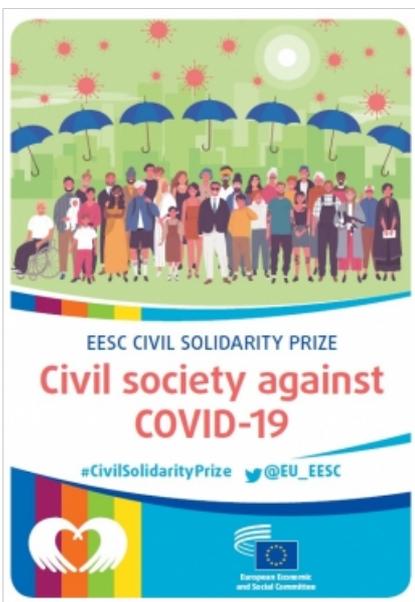
Slovenia - RTV Slovenija: "[Glasujte za ime tedna](#)"

Spain - EL Dia: "[Afammer recibe el premio solidaridad civil del Comité Económico y Social Europeo](#)"

UK - oxinabox.co.uk: "[KIDLINGTON'S CHERWELL COLLECTIVE ONLY UK PROJECT TO WIN €10,000 INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR WORK DURING PANDEMIC!](#)"

New publications

[All the winners in one place](#)



The EESC has published a brochure showcasing all the winning projects from its Civil Solidarity Prize, together with a wealth of background information about the prize itself.

You can download the brochure at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/ge-03-21-103-en-n.pdf>

EESC News

[EMERGENCY WINS EESC CIVIL SOLIDARITY PRIZE FOR ITS CROSS-BORDER BATTLE WITH THE PANDEMIC](#)



The Italian NGO **EMERGENCY** is among 23 projects from the EU and the UK that have received the award for their outstanding contribution to fighting COVID-19 and its disastrous consequences.

The [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#) has awarded the Civil Solidarity Prize to the humanitarian NGO **EMERGENCY** for its invaluable role on the front line of the COVID-19 battlefield. A seasoned crisis-healthcare provider, the NGO developed a replicable and scalable model to design and manage hospitals in a pandemic and set up a field hospital in Bergamo when the city was a hotspot during the first surge of COVID-19 in Europe.

The EESC selected **EMERGENCY** as the winner in the category of projects that had a cross-border or European focus and were operational in more than one country.

The humanitarian NGO called on its decades of experience in providing crisis healthcare in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and Sierra Leone to respond to COVID-19. More usually focused on offering medical care to victims of war and poverty, in 2020, **EMERGENCY** provided assistance in Italy and around the world to contain the pandemic and its consequences. Its contribution was also key in the Mediterranean Sea, where **EMERGENCY** is involved in search and rescue operations.

EMERGENCY was announced as one of the 23 prize-winners at a virtual awards ceremony held by the EESC on 15 February. Each winner received a **prize worth EUR 10 000**.

Presenting the prizes, the EESC's vice-president for communication, **Cillian Lohan**, said:

"The EESC has repeatedly stressed that solidarity and targeted shared action are key to surviving such a pandemic. The only effective response to a crisis such as this pandemic is to act quickly, decisively, and together. There are lessons here for dealing with other crises, whether they are social, economic or environmental.

Civil society has been at the forefront of all solidarity actions and without their help on the ground, the price paid for this pandemic would be much higher. All the projects we received are proof of selfless citizen and grassroots engagement, showing the contribution of civil society in this fight to be enormous. With this prize, we are acknowledging the people and organisations making a difference in these unprecedented times. It is an honour to be able to celebrate together".

The awards went to the winning entries from 21 countries of the European Union. One prize was given to a project with a cross-border focus and one to an organisation from the United Kingdom, as a gesture meant to show that the EESC wanted to keep close ties with UK civil society, despite the fact that the country has left the EU.

Although the EESC aimed to find a winner from each EU Member State and from the UK, six countries offered no eligible entries.

The winners were selected from a total of 250 applications submitted by civil society organisations, individuals and private companies. All of the projects had solidarity as their driving force and displayed creative and effective ways of rising to the often-daunting challenges posed by the crisis.

Most projects targeted vulnerable groups or people most affected by the crisis such as the elderly and young people, children, women, minorities, migrants, the homeless, medical personnel or employees and employers.

As regards the projects' content, there were five main themes: food supply and assistance to vulnerable groups, medical equipment, advisory services, educational services and information on the pandemic, and culture.

THE CROSS-BORDER WINNER

EMERGENCY received the award as one of the entries focusing on the theme "medical equipment in production and distribution".

Having worked in Sierra Leone during the 2014/2015 Ebola outbreak, **EMERGENCY** was able to react to this new epidemic and implement infection prevention and control, as well as more effective triage in its clinics abroad to guarantee the continuity of non-COVID services. Its guidelines for compartmentalising health structures, for virus control and for protecting staff and patients were applied in developed health systems, as well as in those with fragile and under-resourced health care structures. **EMERGENCY's** know-how was used in centres for minors and seniors, in shelters for migrants and on boats.

In Italy, one of the most badly affected countries at the start of the pandemic, **EMERGENCY** set up a field hospital in Bergamo, managed an ICU ward, and reorganised permanent and mobile clinics to prevent workers and patients catching the disease. Alongside international organisations, local governments, civil society organisations and public and private entities, it responded to the medical and social needs of people for whom the epidemic was not only a health risk but also a blow to their economic survival. In Milan, Catania, Venice and Piacenza, it set up a delivery service of basic goods for anyone to whom going out posed a threat

"This award acknowledges the importance of ensuring the same standard of protection and care worldwide. Our flexible and replicable response has been implemented in several contexts, from Europe to Asia and Africa," explains President **Rossella Miccio**. "The prize's potential to foster awareness and promote partnerships among a global audience is key as we focus on building resilient health systems and making sure that nobody is left behind during this health and social crisis. Therefore, **EMERGENCY** would like to dedicate this award to the most marginalised and vulnerable people in society. We're committed to leave no one behind".

The EESC hopes that the Civil Solidarity Prize will enhance the visibility and raise awareness not only of the winning projects but also of many other creative citizens' initiatives taking place in the EU.

"Today, we are not applauding only our 23 winners. We are taking our hats off to all of Europe's civil society and to so many of its organisations, companies and individuals who have shown and who keep showing unprecedented solidarity, courage and civic responsibility in these difficult and trying times", **Mr Lohan** said.

The projects and initiatives run by citizens and civil society in many ways complemented efforts undertaken by Member States to cushion the blows of the crisis and were even ahead of them in some areas, such as the production of face-masks at local and regional level, the EESC said.

Compared to the entries received for the Civil Society Prize in previous years, the EESC saw an increased number of applications from informal or less well-established organisations, which clearly demonstrates the spirit on the ground.

THE PRIZE CRITERIA

The EESC launched the prize in July 2020, with the theme "Civil Society against COVID-19", announcing that it would be an exceptional, one-off award replacing its trademark Civil Society Prize. The aim was to pay tribute to Europe's civil society, which actively and selflessly engaged in acts of solidarity from the very first days of the pandemic.

The contest was open to individuals, civil society organisations and companies whose projects had to be strictly not-for-profit and not more than 50% publicly funded. They had to be directly linked to COVID-19, specifically aiming to fight the virus or to tackle its consequences.

Each year, the EESC's flagship Civil Society Prize honours civil society organisations and/or individuals whose projects celebrate European identity and common values in a particular field of work. It has been awarded since 2006.

CHERWELL COLLECTIVE WINS THE EESC CIVIL SOLIDARITY PRIZE FOR THE UK

Cherwell Collective's "Live, Learn, Eat, Grow" is among 23 projects from the EU and the United Kingdom that have received the award for their outstanding contribution to fighting COVID-19 and its disastrous consequences.

The **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** has awarded the Civil Solidarity Prize to the UK's **Cherwell Collective** for its project, which fights against COVID-related food insecurity and financial hardship by empowering people to become an active part of their own supply chain. Focusing on waste reduction, education and outreach, the Cherwell Collective is helping make its community more sustainable and better prepared for a post-COVID future.

The EESC selected **Cherwell Collective** as the best UK candidate for the Prize, feeling that its entry stood out as a shining example of remarkable solidarity and civic responsibility during the COVID-19 crisis.



Since the beginning of the pandemic in March, the Oxford-based not-for-profit company has supplied food and other provisions to many residents in need. Instead of simply mitigating food and supply shortages, it devised actions to teach people how to grow their own food and to reduce waste by learning how to make the best use of all surplus foodstuffs. Through education and empowerment, people become more independent and self-sufficient.

With "Waste not, want not" as its unofficial theme, the Collective hopes its forward-thinking approach will help reduce food poverty and increase well-being after the crisis.

Cherwell Collective was announced as one of the 23 prize-winners at a virtual awards ceremony held by the EESC on 15 February. Each winner received a prize worth **EUR 10 000**.

THE UK WINNER

combining it with other actions, such as distributing medical equipment or offering additional support services for everyday life. The primary target groups were the elderly, especially those living alone, the homeless, families in need, minorities, migrants and refugees.

Cherwell Collective received the award as one of the entries focusing on the theme "food supply and assistance to vulnerable groups". The theme grouped together projects supplying food rations, such as freshly-cooked food or fresh fruit and vegetables, often

The Collective runs three interconnected core projects: Cherwell Larder delivered supplies to some 600 people each week during the UK's first lockdown and now feeds more than 1000 a week.

Born out of produce shortages and supply-chain problems, Harvest @ Home provides basic garden supplies and guidance for people to grow their own food. Climatarian Kitchen offers cooking courses, meal kits and ready meals made from surplus food. Meal kits include flexible recipes that help build people's confidence in the kitchen. Since July 2020, the initiative has supplied 100 households each week.

"I am honoured to receive this prize on behalf of the hundreds of people and organisations who have helped make this project possible," said Collective founder **Emily Connolly**. "This prize gives instant international credibility that could immediately facilitate dozens of local jobs and, in the long term, will empower the sustainable redevelopment of our community."

ALISON LEARNING PLATFORM WINS EESC CIVIL SOLIDARITY PRIZE FOR IRELAND



The Irish online course providing information about coronavirus (COVID-19) in more than 70 languages is among 23 projects from the EU and the UK that have received the award for their outstanding contribution to fighting COVID-19 and its disastrous consequences.

The [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#) has awarded the Civil Solidarity Prize to the Irish learning platform [Alison](#) for its free online course which was developed and published at the very start of the pandemic to educate as many people as possible about the virus, its spread and its effects.

The EESC selected the **learning platform Alison** as the best Irish candidate for the prize, saying that its project **Coronavirus: What you need to know** stood out as a shining example of solidarity and civic responsibility during the COVID-19 crisis.

The online course was launched in February 2020 when knowledge about the virus was still very scarce and governments were still struggling with how to respond to the looming crisis. With its training programme, which is based on guidelines from the WHO and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is continuously updated to include the latest

information, the Irish platform has given people free access to potentially life-saving knowledge.

The social enterprise Alison was announced as one of the 23 prize winners in a virtual award ceremony held by the EESC on 15 February. Each winner received a **prize worth EUR 10 000**.

THE IRISH WINNER

The course **Coronavirus: What you need to know** received the award as one of the entries focusing on the theme of "educational services and information on the pandemic".

The course covers many aspects of the disease in detail and offers advice on how to protect yourself. It was translated into more than 70 languages in less than four months, with the help of 5 000 volunteers, many of whom were immigrants. Approximately 350 000 people had completed the course as of September 2020, with some 100 000 people signing up for it in a single day.

The course is certifiable, which means people can assess how much they have learned at the end. Alison has previously organised courses on SARS, swine flu and Ebola. Its next task will be to come up with courses on learning to live with COVID-19.

"As Europe's largest free learning platform, we understood the opportunity and responsibility upon us to disseminate information and advice about the threat of COVID-19 in January 2020. A learning platform like Alison has the potential to spread certifiable information for the public good extremely quickly in multiple languages," said **Mike Feerick**, CEO and founder.

"We particularly welcomed the help of Alison's volunteers from Europe's immigrant population, who helped with translations across the world. We see our work, and that of our volunteers, as not just part of an effort of Europeans helping fellow Europeans, but Europeans making a very positive civil society contribution across the world."

FULL LIST OF WINNERS OF THE EESC CIVIL SOLIDARITY PRIZE 2020



Interviews with each winner are available in their respective language version of this newsletter.

COUNTRY **WINNER**

- AUSTRIA** [#EUROPAgegenCovid19](#), an initiative presented by the non-profit company Kommunikationswerkstatt 27, fighting disinformation, fake news and misinformation on the pandemic and motivating citizens to stand up against emotional and cognitive manipulation
- BELGIUM** [OKRA, trefpunt 55+](#), an association that responded to the pandemic with ***The resilience of OKRA***, a creative initiative aimed at keeping older people active and socially connected
- BULGARIA** [Karin dom](#), a foundation which offered online training activities to support families of children with special needs
- CROATIA** [Hrvatska mreža za beskućnike](#), a Croatian network which supported homeless people as the country moved into lockdown and was further hit by an earthquake
- CYPRUS** **Volunteers for the support of vulnerable groups during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic**, for their initiatives which included the delivery of food and medicines to people isolating because of their age or health issues. The initiatives were coordinated by **Erika Theofanidi**
- CZECHIA** [Nevypust' Duši](#) - an organisation created by students and graduates of medicine, psychology and social work whose webinars helped high school students cope with mental health problems and build psychological resilience during the pandemic.
- FRANCE** [Bouge ton Coq](#), a platform which strives to keep rural France alive, for its initiative ***C'est ma tournée! (It's my round!)***, which supported rural shops and businesses struggling to meet costs during the pandemic
- GERMANY** [Krisenchat](#), a 24/7 counselling service which provided free practical support and comfort via Whatsapp or SMS to young people and children
- GREECE** [Steps](#), a non-profit organisation that transformed its existing One-Stop project into ***Many Stops***, providing hot meals, bottled water and personal hygiene products to street-connected people and those in precarious housing;

- HUNGARY** [Magyar Helsinki Bizottság](#), or the Hungarian Helsinki Committee which provided free legal assistance in human-rights-related cases linked to the crisis
- IRELAND** [Alison](#) - Free Online Courses & Online Learning platform, for its project ***Coronavirus: What You Need to Know***, a free COVID-19 facts course that has been translated into over 70 languages and has reached over 350 000 people worldwide
- ITALY** [Casetta Rossa](#), a non-profit association which combines food delivery to vulnerable people with a radio station broadcasting information and personal stories to boost morale
- LITHUANIA** [Karolina Barišauskienė](#), a communications expert for her project ***Priešakinė linijose (At the Front Lines)***, a digital campaign of stories and insights from medical professionals on the coronavirus front line
- MALTA** [Malta Chamber of SMEs](#) for its project ***With You All the Way***, which provided online advice and peer support to help thousands of SMEs to adapt to the pandemic
- POLAND** **Krystyna Paszko** a high-school student who created ***Chamomiles and Pansies***, an online shop offering a lifeline to victims of domestic violence during lockdown
- PORTUGAL** [Vizinhos à Janela](#), a neighbourhood initiative presented by **Íñigo Hurtado** which brought some relief through daily balcony concerts and food delivery to people in need
- ROMANIA** [Asociația Prematurilor](#), the Romanian association of premature babies, for its project ***Support for Medical Staff and Newborns in Maternity - Protective Equipment and Apparatus Against COVID-19*** in maternity wards
- SLOVENIA** [Društvo psihologov Slovenije](#), an association of Slovenian psychologists, for their project ***Psychosocial Support to General Public and Professional Support to Psychologists and Other Healthcare Professionals During COVID-19 Outbreak in Slovenia***
- SLOVAKIA** [Človek v ohrození](#), a non-profit NGO, for its initiative ***Their Health is Also Our Health***, which supported hard-hit Roma communities and helped them through the pandemic

[Asociación de Familias y Mujeres del Medio Rural](#) (AFAMMER), an association of families and women in rural areas for its project ***AFAMMER Great Rural***

SPAIN ***Solidarity Network***, which brought together hundreds of women in rural Spain who gave their time and sewing skills to tackle a shortage of protective masks and the growing isolation of elderly people during the pandemic;

SWEDEN Community and arts space and non-for-profit company **Blivande** for its project ***Crisis Response*** - an open-source initiative to create protective healthcare equipment on a large scale

UNITED KINGDOM **Cherwell Collective, CIC**, for their project ***Live, Learn, Eat, Grow***, which provided food and other essentials to people in need and trained residents to grow their own food

CROSS-BORDER / EUROPEAN **Emergency**, an Italy-based NGO, for the assistance it provided in Europe and worldwide to contain the pandemic, in particular through its *Replicable Model of Safety and Protection Measures*, a scalable model to design and manage hospitals during the pandemic

DID YOU KNOW...?



Our Civil Solidarity Prize was one of a kind in many ways. Find out some surprising facts about some of our winners and the prize itself!

1. In early 2020, the EESC had already chosen the theme for its traditional Civil Society Prize when COVID-19 struck. As the news about acts of solidarity started pouring in, the EESC decided to launch a Civil Solidarity Prize instead.
2. Unlike for the Civil Society Prize, which is presented to up to five winners from all over Europe, the EESC was now looking for **a champion in each EU country and the UK**. Another novelty is that it was also open to companies, and not just to civil society organisations as is the case with the traditional prize.
3. The EESC Civil Solidarity Prize received the **second highest number of entries in the history of the EESC Civil Society Prize** and is topped only by the 2015 prize dedicated to helping migrants and refugees.
4. As compared to previous prizes, the EESC this year received a larger number of entries from organisations that have not been formally established, such as **groups of volunteers or neighbours**, which clearly shows the spirit on the ground.
5. **Krystyna Paszko** from Poland is the youngest winner ever in the history of the prize. She was 17 when she submitted her entry, so her application had to be signed by her mother. Despite her tender age, Krystyna has taken the European media by storm with her original but incredibly brave project of providing a lifeline to victims of domestic abuse. Articles about her appeared in many media outlets across Europe, and she was interviewed by the BBC.
6. The saying "troubles never come alone" was acutely felt by our winning contestant, the **Croatian Network for the Homeless**. Only a few days after the national authorities had imposed a strict lockdown, a strong earthquake shook the Croatian capital of Zagreb for the first time in 140 years.
7. Some of our winners already had experience of responding to virus threats in the past. The NGO **Emergency**, our cross-border winner, provided help during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, whereas our Irish winner, the Alison learning platform, had already organised courses on SARS, swine flu and Ebola.
8. Some of our winners have also won other prizes for other COVID-related projects. One example is the Lithuanian communication expert, **Karolina Barišauskienė**. Before walking home with the Civil Solidarity Prize for her project documenting the work of medical staff at COVID-19 frontlines, she had won a Lithuanian PR award for "Aware Youth - Enabled Elderly", a social project encouraging young people to respect quarantine rules.
9. Many of our 250 candidates not only carried out valuable work on the ground, but also came up with inventive names for their projects. Contestants from Spain and Slovenia seem to have been especially inspired and some of their initiatives bear names such as **#SoulFoodFighters**, **"Anti-racist Pantry"**, **"It Never Rains but it Pours"** or **"Hotel Corona"**, **"Pimp my Walls"** and **"Our Streets are Empty but our Hearts are not"**. (1)

In the winners' words

Cherwell Collective: "My anxiety made it possible". says founder....



The dreaded prospect of food shortages hitting family and friends in the wake of the pandemic was what first drove Emily Connally to start Cherwell Collective. It turned out that a lot more people would need her help, as she explains in this interview.

"If I can be 100% honest, my anxiety made this possible," Ms Connally reveals candidly. "My community was facing a global pandemic on top of our self-inflicted Brexit wound. I kept having nightmares that my children might have to watch their friends starve and then people would be breaking down the gate to get to my parsnips (we had expanded our home vegetable garden to prepare for Brexit shortages)."

The first thing she did was to set up a Google form to see whether there were families in the area who might appreciate having some extra cooking done for them. "Twelve people signed up on Friday. By Monday hundreds of families had signed up, from all over the UK," she recalls. "My nightmare was going to come true if I didn't do something to prevent it."

Ms Connally recalls. "It was clear that my

Rather than letting her anxiety get the better of her, she found a way round it: "As is the case for many people with anxiety, I become hyper-focused on working through the pain and fear so that it didn't overwhelm me," the Collective founder acknowledges. "In the end I had too many, so I just gave people my parsnips anyway, and also helped others grow their own."

The project did experience some growing pains. "In the first few weeks it was rocky," concedes Ms Connally, "but thanks to the perseverance of a few people, especially those who needed the services, now we have literally had hundreds of people wanting to help build this into a long-term, sustainable local resource."

And the results are there for all to see. The following are testimonials from people who are part of Cherwell Collective; they include several beneficiaries but also a number of volunteers.

"I am hugely impressed by these initiatives and the ethos that drives them. The Cherwell Larder [one of the Collective's initiatives] seems to triumph in breaking down the stigma of food banks and creating a sense of community."

"Being part of the Larder, helping others and having a contact outside of my home environment has given me meaning again."

"There has never been any judgement and no having to prove your need, which can be quite embarrassing... I have only experienced kindness and respect from everyone involved."

"My mental health and the health of my autistic son were greatly affected by COVID-19 and the Larder meant I didn't have to put us at risk [by going] shopping and being too near people. They have been a godsend."

"I had an accident at work. I'm a nurse who worked through the first lockdown on a COVID ward. I broke my foot at work in September and I would have honestly been lost without the Larder, it has kept food on the table for me and my boys."

"You have been amazing! I worked in the event sector, which completely shut down due to COVID. Until I found out about the Larder there were days I didn't eat so I could make sure my mum, who has COPD and a few other illnesses, and my then-pregnant sister could eat a decent meal, but with the help of the Cherwell Larder I can have at least one meal every day, which I will be forever truly grateful for to you and your team."

"When the lock down hit, my husband was furloughed, which may not have been too bad but as we already relied on overtime to top up wages and get by, it hit us hard... Add onto that having young children and being pregnant, having to isolate and not being able to get shopping delivered. Anyway it was a difficult time, and very worrying. The Larder helped obviously with food but also hope and faith in the human race, they were so thoughtful and kind, sending additional items for the baby and generally just being a total sweetheart. I am forever grateful and think this is such a wonderful service to help people in such need. I also want to say that every volunteer who has delivered has been so kind, polite and non-judgemental. So thank you to everyone involved, you are all angels."

The EESC's prize money of 10 000 EUR will help the Cherwell Collective scale up their project.

"We have created another Google form to ask the community what they want us to use the money for," explains Ms Connally, "and everyone seems to agree the number one priority for the prize is setting the foundations to sustain these resources in the long term."

Sustainability will be at the core of the Cherwell Collective's future expansion: "We are already working on a new project: Greenspace Gardens. These are large, immersive growing projects to expand [our initiative] Harvest @ Home and grow food in local playgrounds, community gardens, and anywhere people will allow us to grow food for the community."

Greenspace Gardens include native species, demonstration gardens for different methods of gardening, "and, of course, pollinator places to welcome and protect the animals that help us grow food," Ms Connally explains. "We are experimenting with growing rice and ancient grains in the local floodplains as well."

Always keen to see the prize reward multiple engagement, EESC info asked Cherwell Collective's founder what her advice would be to people who are deciding whether to embark on a similar project.

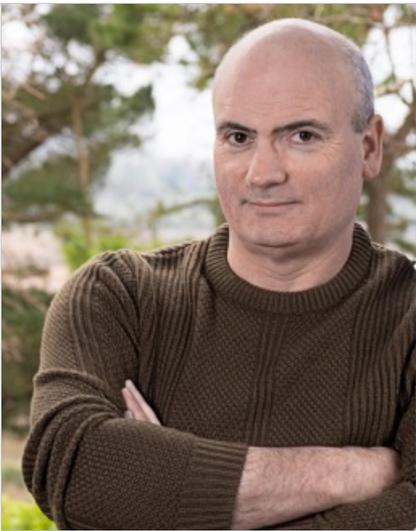
"Harden yourself to people saying no, especially in the beginning," she said. "Many people will tell you your vision is not the way, but to achieve results is to continue to push for the change you want to see in the world. Enthusiasm and solidarity are contagious and people will join you, as long as you show them it's possible."

Her golden rule? "If you think your community needs help, you're right. If you think someone else will do it, you're wrong."

[Alison.com: fighting the COVID infodemic with its own weapons](#)

Spotting a misinformation crisis in the making from the very first appearance of COVID-19, Irish-based Alison, one of the world's largest free learning platforms, decided to use its huge network of health professionals and translators to provide reliable information and education about the new coronavirus to as many people as possible. An online platform is nimbler than government, nimbler than an NGO, founder Mike Feerick tells EESC info, and this has helped Alison make a difference.

What prompted you to start your project or initiative?



When the new coronavirus was mentioned on the news in January 2020, we immediately knew a global humanitarian crisis was afoot. Trusted free online platforms like Alison.com with a global audience have a unique ability to spread and share critically important information in a very efficient and quick manner. We've seen this not least through our development of free courses to help people understand the threat of the previous global viruses Ebola, SARS and Swine flu. Using the CDC [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and WHO guidelines, we knew we had expert, accurate content. It just needed to get to people and communities asap. As one of the world's largest free learning platforms, we saw it both as an opportunity to educate our learner base and recognise the responsibility to assist the global efforts.

Governments and NGOs can move quickly, but sometimes not as quickly as a platform and team such as Alison. As a social enterprise, we can also instantly recruit an army of knowledgeable volunteers around the world. With the COVID response, we not only had over 5 000 translation volunteers but also 800+ medical practitioners - from professors of medicine in Cairo to nurse practitioners in the United States. There is tremendous goodwill among people towards each other worldwide. We just knew we could harness that goodwill into action more quickly than most and at scale. We'll be even better prepared and able the next time there is a global pandemic!

How has your project been received? Have you obtained any feedback from the people you helped?

Our project was very positively received. The number of students taking our translated COVID courses (near 400 000) speaks for itself, but also, our volunteers were proud of their

contribution - and were delighted with the recognition we gave them. We created a COVID "[Hall of Fame](#)" on our website to recognise the volunteers who put in the most work. While we had 5 000 volunteers, a smaller number in the 100s did the heavier lifting.

People like to give, but they also like to be acknowledged - and as much as we at Alison are pleased we organised this project, it is nice too to get the recognition from the EU - it means a lot to the Alison team and our learners and volunteers around the world. We don't do it for the praise - but it's nice to get it all the same.

On the [Alison LinkedIn postings relating to the award](#), there are 383 reactions and 281 comments as of 19 February 2021. On [my posting](#), there are 93 reactions and 23 comments. Some inspiring comments there!

How will you use this specific funding to provide further help in the community? Are you already planning any new projects?

This funding will be spent on developing our capabilities to respond with appropriate actionable information for any type of global crisis, whether it is a global pandemic threat, the aftermath of the devastation of a tsunami, or how we as a global community need to respond asap to the threat of climate change.

Our view is that in every challenge or crisis the world faces, actionable and trusted information, knowledge and skills have their role to play. Education is part of nearly every solution! We know it, and we are determined to build our platform and community such that together, we can prove that civil solidarity has a hugely important role to play in our society, not just within Europe where we are based, but right around the world.

What advice would you give to other organisations in terms of achieving results with such activities and programmes?

Three pieces of advice:

- **Use the power of technology.** New communications and information technologies can create solutions and tools for social justice and civil solidarity that are more powerful than ever before. Look to technology as the one thing that can augment your empathetic response 100X.
- **Build a community of trust.** However small you are, operate your organisation and business affairs in a trusted professional manner. You won't always get everything right, but you will build a large following, and people will follow your lead over time.
- **Use the "power of the crowd".** There is tremendous goodwill among people. People want to help each other, particularly when in need. So look to volunteers to augment the impact of your paid staff. If you present the "crowd" with the opportunity to contribute, they will stand up and be counted. Ordinary people are the same wherever you go. Have faith in humanity, and it will place faith in you.

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