How we organized the 5ᵗʰ International Ecosocialist Encounters

**as part of a
(nonexistent) series of guides on**

How to Organize
an International Conference

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Here are some links of the Encounters that we referred to in this document:

The Welcome Kit: https://www.alterecosoc.org/5th-international-ecosocialist-encounters/how-will-it-be/

The Final Report: https://www.alterecosoc.org/5th-international-ecosocialist-encounters/the-final-report-of-the-5th-international-ecosocialist-encounters/

The Wrap-up: https://www.alterecosoc.org/moving-forwards-5th-international-ecossocialist-encounters/

The Final Budget: https://www.alterecosoc.org/final-budget-of-the-5th-encounters/

Contents

What is this booklet about?

In Spring 2021, after consulting partner organization, Climáximo decided organize a series of conferences in January 2022 in Lisbon, Portugal. The weekend of 14-16 January would have the 2nd Global Conference of the Glasgow Agreement, an international campaign of grassroots climate justice groups. The following week, on 17-19 January, there would be the training and conference of Global Climate Jobs campaign. Finally, the 5th International Ecosocialist Encounters on the weekend of 21-23 January would be the major conference open to public participation. One underlying reason to join several initiatives was to facilitate logistics: travels, accommodation, food arrangements, and time for networking. There was also clear articulation of political contents among the conferences, each feeding to the next.

In Summer 2021, we started planning the 5th International Ecosocialist Encounters.

We are a young, informal, dedicated group that values rotating roles.

The people who took up the initial task of setting up the launch had organized or actively participated in similar

conferences, but had never conceptualized one. Where to start? What really matters? What is urgent? What issues should be left open for a participatory process? What should be decided in advance and clearly in order to mobilize groups and individuals when we make the proposal? What variables should we be preparing ourselves for?

We asked around. Loads of people kindly and generously gave us suggestions and recommendations. But no one really knew how to guide us through the uncertainties and ambiguities.

We had to improvise a lot.

At the end of the conference, in our internal evaluation meeting, we thought that **a guide of how to organize international conferences** would be *extremely useful* as well as *completely irrelevant* for us. It would be irrelevant, because very probably, most of it would not correspond to our context, needs and priorities. But it would be extremely useful because it would highlight *what kind of questions* we should be asking ourselves at what stage of the preparations.

We agreed: **if there was such a guide, we would surely have read it through in Spring 2021**, to later ignore it when we set up our own preparatory process.

So here it is.

We are aware that our target audience is extremely small. To begin with, the whole concept of the Encounters is informed by progressive values and ideological choices. Other conferences may be less ambitious on participatory processes, and yet others may be open to a wider political debate outside the ecosocialist ideals. Next, the Encounters in Lisbon were organized entirely by volunteers, which may not be your case. Perhaps most importantly, we are talking to core organizers of the/a conference. For the Encounters, that was two activists, to be later extended to a larger coordination team of ten people.

We still hope this document to be useful.

How to use this booklet?

Read it from cover to cover and underline things you found interesting to reflect.

Then put it aside.

A couple of months later, look at it again to check your highlights.

Yet a couple of months later, skim through it, focusing on the parts you did <u>not</u> underline.

This is not a guide.

We don't aim at exposing the *entire* preparatory process. We decided to write this document *after* the Encounters ended, so we hadn't even kept track of what happened exactly when.

We will write colloquially. There are some chapters and sections, but we did not worry much about how to handle interlinked issues so the structure is rather loose.

One thing we will <u>not</u> do is to summarize the visible parts. So we are assuming that you had a look at the Ecosocialist Encounters website (especially the Welcome Kit and the Final Report).

So, our goal is: **this document *is* the conversation we would have liked to have with other organizers** in Summer 2021. It's barely coherent but makes sure *not* to leave a lot of things out.

For reference throughout the text, we start with a timeline of preparations and our organizational structure in Portugal. Then we move on to our goals and specific challenges. Finally, we share a few notes on logistics.

Let's roll.

Timeline of Preparations of the Encounters

July (6 months before)

>   read reports of other Encounters

>   prepare a Concept Document

>   prepare a Calendar of Preparations

August (5 months before)

>   initial invitations to individuals and organizations

>   finalize Concept Document, ready to circulate widely

September (4 months before)

>   first international preparatory meeting: discuss goals, content ideas, call-out (meetings every three weeks from here on)

October (3 months before)

>   receive and discuss session proposals

>   launch the Call

>   venue confirmed

>   first preparatory meeting in Portugal (biweekly meetings from here on)

>   internal discussion on the purpose of the Encounters vis-à-vis other summits and conferences

November (2 months before)

presentation in the People's Summit at COP26

decide program structure

kitchen team confirmed

coordination team in Portugal created

December (1 month before)

weekly preparatory meetings in Portugal from here on

final decision on the Go / No-Go of the Encounters (considering constraints due to Portuguese Legislative Elections and COVID-19 border restrictions)

confirmation of all sessions

First week of January (2 weeks before)

last international meeting

21-23 January: The 5th International Ecosocialist Encounters

Teams Structure of the Encounters

based on	Technical skills	^ | ^^ | ^^^
	Organizational skills	* | ** | ***
	Workload	● | ●● | ●●●

Media and Outreach ^^ | ** | ●●

- prepare editorial calendar for media and social networks

- send press releases

- prepare and hang posters

- manage social media accounts

- organize debates and webinars before the Encounters

- photos of sessions

- live streaming (confirm with Program team)

Program ^ | *** | ●●●●

- prepare guidelines on how to organize sessions and follow-up with sessions

- collect guest speakers information

- set and facilitate plenaries

- documentation during the Encounters and prepare Final Report

- set up and delegate Children Space

- set up and delegate Art Space

Registrations ^^ | ** | ●●

- prepare and manage registration form

- inform Food and Translation teams

- in contact with Finance team

- confirm registrations

- prepare Welcome Kit

Volunteers management ^ | *** | ●●

- prepare and manage online recruitment form
- organize open preparatory meetings
- recruit for Translation and Comrade Accommodation teams
- set up Reception Desk

Comrade accommodation ^ | ** | ●

- identify needs of guest, talking to Program team
- find hosts for guests through direct contacts
- match guests and hosts
- liaison with the online platform for accommodation of other participants

Finance ^^^ | * | ●●●

- provide accounting transparency
- purchase and accompany travel tickets and visas
- fundraising via endorsing organizations
- in contact with Translation, Food, Registration and Venue teams

Venue ^ | * | ●

- liaison with the venue
- set up and clean up the space
- set up Technical Support team during the Encounters
- create space for stands of organizations

Translation ^ | *** | ●●

- written translation to EN, PT, ES, FR (session descriptions, guest biographies, Welcome Kit, Final Report)
- in contact with Volunteers Management team
- set up simultaneous translation teams and shift (in contact with Program team)
- liaison with the translation technicians

Food ^ | * | ●●

- liaison with kitchen collective
- in contact with Registration team
- organize tickets and inform Reception team

Internal Processes ^ | *** | ●●●

- manage the mailing lists and send out summarized information

- check the emails

- update the website

- set up and facilitate international preparatory meetings

- set up and facilitate preparatory meetings in Portugal

- liaison with other January conferences in Lisbon

How to launch?

If you know too much what you are proposing, then only people who fully agree with that idea will join. If you reveal too little in your initial proposal, then no one will take your idea seriously. So you need to motivate and mobilize other organizers while at the same time recognizing their political experience and needs. How to do that? In particular, how to do that when you don't even know most of your possible partners?

The heuristics is that you should have

- **a very clear idea of why** you are organizing the conference (identified necessities, purpose)

- **a somewhat clear idea of how** the conference should look like (structure of sessions)

- **a vague idea of the content** of the conference (sessions, speakers), and

- **no idea of the desired outcomes** (objectives, decisions)

before you make your first contacts.

This was, we thought, at the exit of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a voiced necessity within the movement for a real-life meeting that enables networking and trust building.

The previous editions of the Encounters were designed in axes/topics, which were autonomously organized by axis coordinators. The 4th Encounters in 2018 had, for instance, five topics: food sovereignty, green capitalism, labor and climate, energy democracy, and ecofeminism. With the topics having three sessions each, plus additional sessions, the 4th Encounters had 20 panels and around 80 panelists (counting with moderators). We looked at that model, and we thought: no one will travel to Lisbon to hear these panels and everyone will ask us if we will film the Encounters. **Why would people show up?** We also thought: throughout 2020 and 2021, all the possible panelists held so many webinars that most of what they can say is already somewhere in the internet. **Why would the panelists themselves come all the way to Lisbon?**

Our second concern was about content. The first Encounters took place in 2014. Eight years and four Encounters forward, **what would people like to talk about and listen to?** Political analysis and thematic discussions have already happened. What would other ecosocialist organizers actually need?

This is how the Concept Document was created. We accepted the ecosocialist theory built by the previous Encounters and wanted to move forward to the task of building an ecosocialist civilization. We structured the program under three questions:

1) How?

This was the strategy question, on where the power lies and is exercised today, how can it be dismantled, how we can create disruption, how we should organize ourselves, how to have resilience, how to win the narrative, and what tactics we can use.

2) Who?

This is the agency question, on who is presently mobilizing to achieve ecosocialism, who isn't but should be, who the revolutionary subjects are, and what role existing social categories play.

3) Where to?

This is the vision question, on how an ecosocialist society would be organized and what its values would be.

What matters here is that we decided upon this structure before initial contacts. We obviously did ask some

comrades for feedback, but there was no formal contact until we were clear on why we were proposing to organize the Encounters. Our initial invitations already included the Concept Document.

The Concept Document had sections on Context, Ambition, Program Form, Desired Outcomes, and Goals. The Desired Outcomes and Goals were intentionally left blank.

In order not to procrastinate over planning and preparations, we also prepared a tentative calendar of what needed to happen when. This was **a calendar of deadlines by weeks**. What needed to be ready by when, so that the next step could be taken. After writing it up, we did two sanity controls: First, we ran it forwards and backwards in our heads, to see if there were missing pieces. Second, we showed it to a couple of people who were absolutely uninvolved in the process, so that they would identify unspoken assumptions in our plan.

This was also ready before the initial invitations. We did not share this calendar with anyone at this stage. We only discussed it with the coordination team in Portugal once that was formed.

What to do with the first meetings?

There is a lot of confusion on why people do meetings. Some people call for meetings which are in fact briefings or presentations. Other meetings are actually meant to be open assemblies. Others are very operational. With online meetings overloading all of us, the lack of clarity on why a certain meeting exists demotivates people. So make sure to have a clear goal in mind, make sure you are inviting the right people and only the right people, and tell them your goal and why you need them in that meeting in particular.

In August 2021, we contacted the people involved in the previous Encounters using the Concept Document, to get a general sense of how they felt about the idea. We also sent out an email to international networks. This was a "save the date" message, as well as a question on if they would like to participate in the design and preparations. Some said yes, of which some gave suggestions; others declined due to lack of availability. Fortunately for us, no one challenged the concept itself, so we could move forwards.

On 16 September 2021, we had our first international online meeting. Some 20 people showed up. Some of them represented organizations, others were individuals active in the climate justice movement. The announced goals of this

meeting were: to let everyone hear the comments of everyone else on the Concept Document and to mobilize to write a Call. We also created some space for people to suggest content.

(During this meeting, a question was raised as to how the Encounters were different from or similar to other summits like the São Paulo Forum, World Social Forum, previous editions of the Ecosocialist Encounters, and People's Summits during UN's Climate Conferences. We set up a specific discussion meeting on this subject, which happened at the end of October.

We want to highlight this adjustment. We validated this question because it was exactly about *clarifying* why we were organizing *this* conference *now*, asked with a different perspective. We knew why we were organizing the Encounters, but we didn't know how it stands *in comparison to other similar conferences*. We actually didn't have a prompt answer to this question, so we were proactive in exploring it.

This was <u>not</u> the case when people questioned why it had to be real-life, and not online. This was a valid concern of comrades in North America, due to travel costs. We did not open this debate, because we already had a non-negotiable answer: our "why" of the conference included networking

and trust-building, which happen through spontaneous, unmediated interactions – sometimes during the sessions but most often during the breaks. Some of the North American comrades managed to come to Lisbon, most didn't.

The point here is that we had **a very clear idea of why** we were organizing the conference. We had identified necessities and established the purpose of the Encounters, and we stated them in the Concept Document. These were the elements that were not up for contesting.)

In this first international meeting, we set up a small group to draft the Call based on the Concept Document, and everyone committed to reach out to their contacts for us to get as many groups and key individuals as possible to sign it. By 23 September we had the Call circulating, and it was launched by the first week of October, signed by 70 individuals and endorsed by 40 organizations (which reached 70 by December 2021).

The Call also served us to reach out to Portuguese activists. So we used the momentum to call for a Portuguese preparatory meeting on 14 October 2021. This was a poorly facilitated meeting, and that's why we wanted

to tell you about it. A total of 15 people showed up. Some were involved in the Ecosocialist Encounters before, others had no idea what it meant. Very few had received the Concept Document. The facilitation aimed at introducing the Encounter's concept *and* creating a host coordination (we presented the Teams Structure). First of all, this is too much content for any meeting. Secondly, it is an unrealistic expectation that people would hear about a plan and right afterwards commit to coordinating a team in it. The result of this mismatch was that many people pulled back, others were intimidated by the facilitation's request for commitment, yet others accepted to coordinate teams but later did not follow up. Thirdly, the meeting's tone was mixed between informative and operational, although its main function should have been inspirational.

First meetings are crucial for any open process. It's where you set the tone and build your team. If your leadership style is not strong on visionary and affiliative, you will probably have disappointing results. (Check the six leadership styles framework by Daniel Goleman for more information on this.)

What to do with rolling preparatory meetings?

Once the Call was out, we had a brand new problem for us. We had created an international coordination space where we wanted to discuss politics and content, that would meet every three weeks. But we also created a host coordination space in Portugal that was meant to be more operational, which would initially meet biweekly and later weekly. The Portuguese people were the ones we needed to mobilize to make the Encounters *actually* happen, but the Portuguese meetings had nothing political to offer to participants, which were outsourced to the international space. What is worse: A good meeting hour for an international call is 14:00 GMT (it fits to awake times in the Americas as well as in the Far East). That's a horrible hour for working people – most of the organizers in Portugal. So the Portuguese people who were engaged in the preparations actually didn't have the opportunity to discuss politics.

One possible solution would be to do feedback loops: make a provisional decision in the international meeting, then approve it in a Portuguese meeting or return it to an international meeting for further discussion. The time

constraints did not allow such thing. In fact, our preparatory calendar had absolutely no space for this. We couldn't possibly ask for more frequent meetings from our international comrades, as they barely managed to accompany the existing meetings and emails due to their other commitments.

We held a second international meeting on 28 October 2021. The announced goals of this meeting were to discuss the program structure (the architecture of sessions, breaks, plenaries), assign responsibles for the sessions, and present Session Guidelines. In this way, we wanted to make sure that everyone knew how the Encounters would take place (what their actual experience of the Encounters would be) and everyone had established autonomy to organize their sessions.

One thing we did that you may consider doing: We prepared slides for this online meeting, and sent them several days before the meeting. The slides had the options for program structure and also had a list of possible sessions. This way, people had time to think about the content in advance, or talk internally in their organizations.

We allocated people to think about the sessions and contact other interested organizations, in accordance with the Session Guidelines.

The program structure was decided upon on the third international meeting on 18 November 2021. We also gave time for session responsibles to feed back. We had organized the session into three categories: green light (moving forward), yellow light (unsure on commitment), red light (no responsible). Some participants offered themselves for red-light sessions during the meeting.

Between the second and the third meetings, a major change took place in Portugal: the state budget was flunked by the parliament on 27 October 2021, and the president called for legislative elections for 30 January 2022 – the weekend after the Encounters. This reduced our capacities as activists involved in parliamentary politics were pulled by the electoral campaigns. We will talk about how this became a logistical crisis, in the Venue section of this document.

At the same time, while we were calling for a real-life meeting, the borders in Europe were closed. At the end of every month, the European Union would update its COVID-19 border restrictions. We expected that they would slowly open borders, but by the end of November,

Europe was still closed to virtually all countries in the Global South. We will talk about this in the COVID-19 and Borders section of this document, but let us just say that the fourth international meeting was crucial.

In the fourth international preparatory meeting, on 10 December 2021, we voted a Go / No-Go decision for the Encounters. We came up with a format that is almost-hybrid-but-not-really. We are proud of how we dealt with uncertainty, how we built a consensus-building process, and how we did not give up on the Encounters. We will tell you more on this in the COVID-19 and Borders section.

This meeting lasted three hours, had broad and active participation (some 40 people in total), and did not even cover its full agenda. The announced goals were to vote Go / No-Go, and finalize sessions. The sessions were left for an extension meeting on 14 December 2021.

The sixth and last international preparatory meeting happened on 4 January 2022. This was designed to be a briefing on the Encounters and a final check-in. Session coordinators presented expected outcomes and we discussed expected outcomes from the Encounters as a

whole. We created space for logistical doubts and questions.

We are telling you all this, so you get an idea of what we decided when. In parallel, we had Portuguese preparatory meetings that were more operational. We also had open meetings in Lisbon and online. We will tell you more about them in the Volunteers and Preparatory Meetings section.

How to decide what sessions to include?

This is generally a tough question. But we had a procedural solution to this political problem.

To begin with, our three questions (How? Who? Where to?) and the challenge to actually answer them during the session provided a political alignment.

Perhaps more importantly, we insisted on participatory formats. Consulting some experienced facilitators, we prepared Session Guidelines. We demanded that sessions would incorporate interactive tools. We proposed fish-bowl, world café and small group discussions in the Session Guidelines. The Program team accompanied all sessions and assisted preparatory meetings of each session. We asked for a content lead and a facilitation lead for each session.

For a conference, these are very high requirements. Only some groups had the commitment to spend hours designing a session, so we didn't really have an issue with session selection at the end of the day. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, left-wing groups are more interested in telling people what to think ("political

training") rather than creating space for collective learning. This means that the organizers are not familiar to interactive tools and don't know how to use them. We are more used to inviting some 3-4 speakers and setting up a panel. Secondly, we were asking for several meetings, emails and documents from the session responsibles. This implies they should really invest in the Encounters as a movement construction space. Often, when we organize conferences, we are fine with lower levels of engagement. We generally welcome sessions that can be organized by one single person (who would contact speakers, and then brief them just before the session itself).

The Encounters had 9 sessions and an Open Slot (compare with the 20 sessions in the previous edition), and in fact two of them were fully confirmed at the last weeks. So we had the opposite problem: instead of selecting sessions, we struggled to find coordinators for the sessions. This meant that the Program team worked more than usual for such a conference, but this was a choice.

The idea of answering specific task-oriented questions through interactive formats has also another consequence. Only very political people can organize them, and the participants also have to have a certain level of knowledge. This knowledge can be theoretical (readings, analysis, etc.)

or practical (active in the movements), but it needed to exist. We were organizing the Ecosocialist Encounters after all, so we were fine if the program wouldn't be welcoming to a curious passerby. However, we understood that our content was becoming too heavy for newcomers in the movement. This was a problem, because the Encounters existed explicitly to engage them.

We had two ideas.

One was to create parallel sessions of introductory seminars on ecosocialism during the Encounters. So in all time slots, there would be some introductory concept presented in one of the rooms. We couldn't find the capacity to organize these sessions.

The other idea was to have introductory webinars before the Encounters. These would serve as warm-up and to spread the word. We had the ambition to have an Ecosocialism 101 session in all the four languages of the Encounters (EN, FR, PT, ES), which failed. But we did manage to organize two webinars on 6 January and 13 January. In the meanwhile, due to border restrictions, some sessions decided to self-duplicate. By this we mean that the youth session and the ecofeminism session decided to hold one webinar before the Encounters with speakers from the Global South, and then also a real-life session during the Encounters.

How can sessions talk to each other?

All conferences of this scale have to rely on parallel sessions. In the end, everyone gets frustrated for having to choose between sessions. Under this pressure, organizers sometimes offer to film the sessions, but that has a spoiler effect: if I know that everything will be available online later, why should I go to the event? Other organizers hold plenaries where session coordinators are supposed to summarize what was discussed. But when we do this, we give coordinators perhaps 5-10 minutes, so the best they can do is to repeat the session description itself. We did something else.

We held an Opening Session on 21 January 2022, Friday, at 18:00. This had some opening speeches by special guests, but it also set the stage for the upcoming days. We presented the format (also explained in the Welcome Kit) and formed small groups to get to know each other until dinner was served.

On Saturday, there were three parallel sessions from 10:00 to 12:00. After lunch break, we had one and a half hours of

plenary. The parallel sessions had brought back their conclusions written in flip-charts. The plenary room was becoming an exhibition hall. We let people to look at the flip-charts. Then, we formed groups of 3-4 people, with people from each session in every group. They had time to talk about what they discovered in the session and what connections they may find between their sessions.

We did the same in the afternoon sessions on Saturday. We had three two-hour sessions, followed by a one-and-a-half hour plenary. This is how we closed Saturday.

On Sunday, we had three parallel sessions, then lunch, and then the Open Slot.

The Open Space, a two-hour time slot without predefined content, was announced during the second plenary of Saturday. We put up a big flip-chart with time slots, some small papers and board-markers, so that people could offer discussions. We recommended these self-organized sessions to ideally be designed for 30 minutes up to 1 hour, so that we could visit more of them. We started the Open Space in the plenary room, gave people one minute to show their face, tell everyone the topic of their offer, and point to the room where the session will be held.

We counted at least seven discussions in the Open Space. We also realized that many people seized this opportunity to set up meetings: some such meetings were operational, others were just to catch up with each other after the pandemic.

In the Final Plenary (not to be confused by the Closing Session), we let people visit the final exhibition consisting of all the flip-charts of all the sessions. We also asked small groups to reflect on the Encounters as a whole, reminding the three leading questions. These were then compiled in the Final Report.

The Closing Session was mostly for conclusions and evaluation. There were several outcomes that were announced in the Closing Session. Besides, we asked people what went well and what suggestions they have for the next edition of the Encounters.

We were also very careful with breaks. In the program, we had 30-minute breaks. But we paid attention to session formats *while they were being prepared*, to get a realistic timeline that would allow for long breaks. If our objective

was creating space for networking, then we should not fill breaks with content.

You may realize that there are a lot of choices here. We had less sessions than any other such conference would have. The sessions took longer than usual because of the interactive format. The plenaries took up a lot of space: rather than more experienced or more involved people summarizing the core arguments, we let everyone fill flip-charts with whatever conclusions they reached. There is a pay-off here. The quality of the outcomes is reduced, while the quality of the results is increased. That's because the visible outcome represents what people drew from the Encounters rather than guiding them to a more advanced place politically. The organizers get a clearer idea of where participants are at, but have less impact on pushing them forwards.

COVID-19 and Borders

The Encounters took place in January 2022. To remind you how that was: people in Europe were mostly vaccinated, the lockdown measures were being eased gradually, a lot of people were catching the virus and therefore staying home either as patients or as proxies. Worldwide daily cases peaked in January 2022, while deaths remained relatively low. This meant a lot of things for us.

To begin with, from November onward, the Portuguese coordination team never managed to have a fully participated meeting because at least one of us was in isolation. Secondly, it was being impossible to organize events in public spaces. Thirdly, some of our special guests caught the virus and canceled at the last minute. Finally, as we were organizing a series of conferences in January, they had the risk of contagion events, which in turn could mean that our international guests would be stuck in Portugal, which would complicate travel arrangements.

We struggled with all of these within our capabilities, and we are sure you would do your best too. We are just convinced that it was wiser of us to move forwards rather

than shy away from the Encounters. Because there is a deeper lesson to draw from all of this:

At the time of writing, many of us in the Global North pretend that the COVID-19 pandemic is ending. That may be the case. But even after everyone in the Global North had their booster shots, vaccine inequality continues to threaten humanity as a whole and the countries of the Global South may have new waves.

Even if COVID-19 ends soon, the zoonotic spillovers are expected to become more frequent.

Finally, the climate crisis unleashes a series of infrastructure failures and social conflicts, which will complicate our relationships to borders and visas.

We have to talk about how to deal with such situations of generalized states of emergency. They will be our new normal. We may be slowly choosing to seldom organize real-life meetings internationally, and this is a very scary prospect.

Left-wing organizations largely chose to wait out the COVID-19 pandemic. The "strategy" was to deescalate mobilization and restructure organization, to then do something *after* the pandemic.

This may or may not have been the best decision available. But we surely lost precious time to act on the climate crisis, and we had absolutely no guarantee about the end of the pandemic when we chose to wait.

Our concrete situation was as follows. In Summer 2021, we had put our bet on the relaxation of border restrictions by Autumn 2021, allowing us to have global participation in the Encounters. The vaccines did get generalized. The European Union was updating its border policies at the end of every month. After the Call was out, we were a bit unsettled to see that in November the borders were practically the same as they were in the end of 2020. We thought the bureaucrats were playing safe. We hoped the borders would be opened to fully vaccinated people by the end of November. That didn't come through. They opened the borders to people vaccinated by a specific list of vaccines only available in the Global North.

We had no idea what to do. We already had sessions being prepared by comrades from the Global South (check the Special Guests on the website). Around 30 of the 70 endorsing organizations were from the Global South.

We decided to socialize the problem.

We sent out the following email, together with an online form.

Crucial Decision for the Ecosocialist Encounters

Dear friends,

The European Union announced its border restrictions. After blocking free access to vaccine technologies and after administering third shots while the Majority World did not even receive their first dose, European imperialism now limits entry to specific monopolistic vaccine brands. More concretely, the current restrictions are as follows (source: https://www.iatatravelcentre.com/world.php):

[copy-paste]

As the European ecosocialist groups have not built enough political power to counter the neocolonial policies, the current situation implies that we would have very limited participation from the Global South in the Ecosocialist Encounters.

For lack of technical capacities, it is out of question to organize a mixed event (online and offline participation at the same time). The host team in Lisbon is sure that that would fail.

We also think it is not useful to organize the Encounters fully online, as this does not correspond to our initial objectives of interacting, networking and trust-building.

We are sure that we will NOT ignore this problem of participation. Hence, we need your decision.

Our proposal is as follows:

- continue organizing the Ecosocialist Encounters and

- substitute one slot of parallel sessions with 100% online sessions, hosted by and with speakers of the Global South, live-streamed in the venue

The voting options are

- in favour

- indifferent/abstention/blank

- reject/block/veto

We consider this proposal viable only if

- at least 30 organizations vote, and

- at least 15 organizations from the Global South vote in favour, and

- no one blocks the proposal, and

- there is a majority vote in favour.

Please vote in the following online form by December 5th.

Comradely,

We defended this option with three points in mind. One: The European Union border restrictions were a given, and we would either buy tickets now or our budget couldn't

possibly cover last-minute purchases in case borders opened in December (they didn't). Two: Our lack of technical capacity to set up a hybrid event was a given. We had tested and improved it all through 2020 and 2021, and we were sure that literally everyone would be upset by the end of a hybrid event organized by us. Three: A fully online meeting would go against the purpose of the Encounters. We were not available to prepare it online.

We also justified our viability criteria carefully. We demanded at least 30 organizations to vote, which was more than the ones involved on the preparations but approximately half of the entire list. We demanded at least 15 organizations from the Global South to support the proposal: if the Encounters would not be genuinely international as we wished it to be, then majority from the Global South needed to agree to this. We put a veto option, to be explained in the meeting, giving the power to say that this was not politically acceptable. Finally, we required a majority of the votes in favor. 33 organizations voted. More than two thirds of the votes were in favor (there were many abstentions). But there were 5 votes against, and only 12 organizations from the Global South voted in favor. There were organizing groups in Lisbon who had voted against, too.

While difficult to digest from an emotional viewpoint, we were actually ready to call the whole thing off. It was also the hardest online meeting facilitation we prepared. We prepared three different lines of facilitation and three different blocks of slides for different scenarios.

We invited the people who voted against directly. (They showed up.) Plan A was to listen to their arguments, set up a small 3-hour online event for the dates of the Encounters, followed by a 1-hour meeting to set the date and place for the next organizing committee. Plan B was to that they would withdraw their veto (for instance, if it was a misunderstanding on what the proposal was) and we would move on. Plan C was unknown. We had a facilitation plan for a scenario that was, by definition, not predictable.

And of course, we had Plan C.

We made our best to listen and comprehend. There were two technical breaks in the meeting just so we could figure out what to do next in terms of facilitation. At the end, it turned out that our comrades in the Global South were not against the proposal but were arguing that online participation in an offline event reduced their inclusion drastically. We agreed with them. The conclusion built during the meeting was to (1) organize the online slot as stated in the proposal, (2) divert funds allocated to travels

to support internet connection costs for the groups in the Global South, and (3) organize two webinars of the sessions before the Encounters (youth and ecofeminism did this).

From a technical support perspective, we managed to deliver this format. We will talk more about it in the Technical Support section.

Translation team

Language is an inclusion issue. But it is also a technical issue; or at least, translators and interpreters tend to think of it as a highly complex task. We have been in conferences in which poor simultaneous interpretation actually resulting in excluding everyone in the room.

We failed to recruit and we failed to improvise. Here is the story of how we did it.

Before starting, we want to highlight that, from a technical viewpoint, our situation was impeccable. The Bla collective had three technicians in the space, with two rooms ready for radio transmission and other two rooms ready for the spider/whisper translation format. It is very important to get good technical people to support the translation infrastructure. And by good people, we don't mean highly professional, perfectionist people. We emphasize flexible, chill, politically minded activists – as are the Bla collective, on top of their technical qualifications.

We depended entirely on volunteers, but this cannot explain it because it was also the case in the previous edition which worked well.

The interactive format does explain part of our failure. As everyone in the room was supposed to listen *and* talk, and as we didn't know the exact needs of all participants (registrations were open until the end of the Encounters), it was hard to guess what could be an effective interpretation model.

In any case, our recruitment failed. Translators shied away from the uncertainties of language pairs and shifts. COVID-19 also didn't help because recruitment in general was not going well. We did not lower our entry barrier and we did not inspire people to volunteer. We did not aim at building a team of volunteer interpreters, but instead aimed at filling shifts for specific needs. This means that we also had the wrong mindset. We treated it not as a political task of inclusion, but as a technical service to be provided.

We prolonged this problem during the Encounters. The registration forms had questions on language. One question was which languages a person could express

themselves in, another question was which languages the person would understand when others speak it. Virtually everyone had said they understood English, so we normalized English. We kindly asked speakers and facilitators to intervene in English (and speak slow), and we provided translation to Portuguese and Spanish *during the plenaries only*.

We set the wrong tone in the Opening Plenary when we let non-native English speakers to struggle expressing themselves. The speakers were very kind to follow through our requests and their English was completely comprehensible, but with this example the rest of the participants were cued to normalize English and not ask for being translated.

Instead, the facilitation should have socialized the problem from the start. We should have exposed our lack of interpreters and ask in the room if people would volunteer spontaneously for interpretation. This would have three immediate impacts. Firstly, it would show our willingness to insist in inclusion. Secondly, it could actually improve our interpretation capacities. Thirdly, we would set the example for the sessions so that in the sessions the same request could be made for specific language pairs for short

periods of time. In short, instead of normalizing English, we would have normalized translation.

This our failure is even more visible when we realize that we actually managed to have our entire website as well as the Welcome Kit in four languages. Even if very limited, there were few people who were proficient in some language pairs. We accepted their concerns on simultaneous interpretation as technical limitations, and we never inspired them to step up to increase inclusion in the Encounters.

Having said all of this, we want to point out that simultaneous interpretation is one of the most difficult of functions in a conference. The reason is that for almost all other functions, there is an obvious substitute. In the worst case, one person can stay in the reception desk during the entire Encounters, and it would work. If all other facilitators drop out, one person can facilitate all the plenaries; it would be very tiring but it works. If the person responsible for the registrations gets ill, anyone else can replace them with some initial briefing. That's not the case with interpretation. You actually need the people to be present in the room, and you need them to be proficient in specific languages.

You should address translation at the earlier stages of the preparations.

Some takeaways from our experience, are:

- Interpretation tends to be treated technically. It's a political issue. Do not treat it as an item in a to-do list. Be attentive from the early stages of preparations *until the end of the conference* and look for opportunities of improvement.

- The Opening Session is crucial. It's crucial for the political content, for the facilitation, for the culture you will set up, and for language. Spend time to set it up correctly and mobilize as many interpreters as possible. Whatever you show in the Opening Session will be the norm. If you socialize the problem (for instance, asking for help from the participants), your active effort to provide language accessibility will be normalized.

- Build a team. Do not just have a list of volunteers. (In fact, this is valid for all teams of the conference, probably. We will get back to this in the Volunteers section.) Do one-on-one meetings, and do at least one team meeting. You may want to include the technical support team in that meeting and test the equipment.

Technical Support team

We were a bit distracted with the Technical Support team. The registration form as well as the volunteers' form did include an option to join the Technical Support team, but we procrastinated until late December to find a coordinator for the team.

This was partly because the technical side of the Translation team was secured by the Bla collective. But it was mostly because we were not counting on any online component until the December meeting that changed everything. So basically, after the international preparatory meeting, we had a Portuguese coordination meeting, someone raised a hand and asked: How do we do with tech support? And we woke up. We got small team of six, with one coordinator. All were experienced activists, so we were saved.

One thing we never managed to do was to hold a technical meeting. We needed an operational meeting with all the session responsibles and the coordinators of the Technical Support, Translation, Venue, Program and Internal

Processes teams. A quick status of what was needed when would have saves us a lot of headaches.

One feedback from the team is: visit the venue and the rooms. The second feedback is: visit the venue and the room again. Look carefully at the hardware, test them, turn them off and on, test them again. Then, write a flowchart of problems that you will face and how to address them promptly. You need the flowchart, not because you will forget it, but because you want to write it up and show it to others to see loopholes in it and also because you want to be able to deliver it to other team members.

But so how did we do the almost-hybrid-but-not-really sessions? First, we did not announce the sessions as online. We announced the sessions as real-life sessions with online input from activists in the Global South. Then, we gathered all participants in the session rooms. And we projected the sessions. After the introduction, there were small group discussions, which were facilitated in the room directly. There were a lot of hidden roles in this equation, so let's elaborate a bit more.

Each online session had one back office and one session room.

In the back office, we had one facilitator and one person for online technical support (opening the room, checking sound, muting microphones). Both were in Lisbon with us, in a separate and calm room that we arranged. In the session room, we had one facilitator and one person for offline technical support (projector, sound system, computer). There were three parallel sessions, so we had a total of six people in the team.

The organizations in the Global South did share the Zoom link in their networks, so some people indeed participated online, but the organization avoided publicizing that option unless people registered to the Encounters and stated explicitly that they couldn't come to Lisbon due to border restrictions.

We recorded the online sessions.

Now there is one serious issue with all of this. Language and translation. When the highlighted speakers are online, there are some online participants, there is an entire room of offline participants looking at the projected image, how do you do translation? How many interpreters do you need? How can they hear the desired language and speak the desired language to the correct microphone?

We have no idea. But we acknowledge that if someone wanted to do a serious hybrid session, they would need an army of interpreters and another army of technical support people.

Venue

Solve venue quick. Solve venue smart.

Make sure you know exactly what you need.

Physical conditions: How many rooms? How many big rooms? How big? Do you need internet or projector in all of them? Do you need a sound system (this is useful for translated stuff)? Do you need the chairs to move? Do you need a whiteboard? Do you need to be able to hang stuff or glue things on the walls?

Access: When do you have to enter the venue? When do you plan to leave? Do you want to leave stuff? Do you need an office in a reserved place? Do you need keys? Do you want keys? Why?

Kitchen: What do you have? What do the kitchen collective need? Plates? Cutlery? Fridge? Oven? Tables and chairs?

Do <u>not</u> assume anything. Ask specific questions to the venue administration. In other conferences, we had a lot of acrobatics: for instance, there were plates in a canteen but they belonged to the subsidiary catering company and so

we couldn't use them. In the venue of the Encounters, we saw two refrigerators but they later told us that one was not working.

If you expect uncertainties due to external factors, opt for friendly administration over physical conditions.

Beyond COVID-19 uncertainties, we had the following marvelous adventure. On 27 October 2021, twelve months into the Encounters, the Portuguese parliament flunked the state budget and a few days later the president called for legislative elections for 30 January 2022 – the weekend after the Encounters. We were extremely tense and stressed on the days between the budget voting and the president's announcement. If the elections would be on the same day as we announced the Encounters, then there would be no chance for us to organize a political event. So we were kind of relieved to hear that it would be the week after.

Then on 17 January 2022, the Monday before the Encounters, we were contacted by the venue administration. Due to COVID-19 peaks, the government decided to facilitate early voting for everyone, and Liceu Camões was requisitioned to hold the early elections in the week of the Encounters. At that point, we had put up some three thousand posters around the city, sent out the

Welcome Kit and set up the technical support plans – all for that venue.

On two days, we visited several more venues, none of which had the kitchen conditions. (The food payments were already made by the registered participants, and the ingredients already bought.) The venue administration made an enormous effort, contacting other schools on our behalf, to find alternatives. They also insisted with the city hall that this event was set months ago and they couldn't cancel.

We continued hanging posters pointing to the venue that we didn't know if had or not.

At the end of 18 January 2022, the city hall decided to change the election location to another school, therefore leaving our venue free. These were probably the most stressful days of the preparations for all the coordination team. We needed to find a solution and at the same time not launch a confusion among the participants, which meant we were also alone in dealing with it.

Once again, we know that this is a very specific situation. The point we are trying to make is that there will most probably be a very specific venue crisis in your conference. If you have a purely professional relationship with the venue administration and the venue staff, you will be stuck.

If you have organizations involved in the conference, get a corridor and some tables for them to present their materials.

Decorate the rooms. You may also want to give names of activists to the rooms.

Think about what you mean by the word plenary, and transmit it clearly.

Some people call a session plenary when there is no other session happening and that's all the sufficient conditions for it being a plenary session. Others use it when it's a synthesis moment of parallel sessions. Others think of it as everyone participating. Others mean a decision-making space. This can get pretty confusing for the organizers, for the participants and for the facilitators.

We don't think any of the above is categorically better than the other. But do make a conscious choice, and make your decision visible to everyone.

This is a venue question as much as it is a facilitation question. The physical conditions you need for a plenary vary depending on what a plenary is for you.

Food

If there are restaurants or a canteen in or around the venue, you are safe. Just mention them in the Welcome Kit and you'll be fine.

Otherwise, you will need to find a kitchen collective to join you. And that's going to give you a lot headaches.

Food is political, in at least three ways.

What kind of food you serve is your political statement. We always serve vegan food with no non-vegan options. In the Encounters, there was not even an alternative within the venue, people would have to get out to find other food.

What price you ask for is part of your inclusion policy. This is tricky, because the kitchen team will probably need the numbers in advance and will also ask for an early payment so they can buy the ingredients. This may mean that you would do a prepayment procedure for food: as part of registration, people would have to transfer money for the food costs. This will mean you will have to set prices. And that's difficult, because you will negotiate a number of servings with the kitchen collective without actually knowing how many people will show up and they will give

you a budget accordingly. You will then guess a cost per meal. And you will wish to cover the mistakes either by your own internal budget or you will put the price slightly more than the cost to contain risks.

All of this will exclude low-income people. Mind you, some low-income people are actually high-income people from Global South, which means they may not "look poor" and they may also not have the habit of giving visibility to their financial conditions.

This is a delicate topic. We failed in addressing it properly. We did not pay too much attention to ticket management. We operated with trust and solidarity, and we offered meals to whoever needed it. But this works only if people come to the Encounters, go to the reception desk and explain their situation. This is not the majority of the possible cases. In fact, many low-income people will simply not register without even talking to you directly.

The third aspect is time. Time for food is convivial time. We all have a tendency to cut meal times in favor of session times. If networking is your priority (it was ours), don't cut meal times. Let people cue calmly (cuing time is also convivial time!), serve calmly, eat calmly, and linger around chatting. This also means you should organize the meal area accordingly: small and separated tables don't allow for mingling.

If you work through uncertainties, form a team. This is a general tip on any subject and any team, and it is particularly useful for kitchen and food. We typically think of food as a service to provide. That may be the case, but then you probably have a good budget. If you are not sure how many people will show up, then you need to build trust, create a transparent process, provide reassurance for the people who will cook, and develop flexibility and adaptability.

Here is how we did it: First, we made an on-top-of-the-head initial estimate of participants and asked for a budget. The cost per meal would be around €4,50. So we launched registrations with a €5 price per meal prepayment option. The registrations were going well, but the prepayments were discouraging. Two weeks before the Encounters, we talked to the kitchen collective again. We reduced the number of meals and offered to increase the price per meal to around €5,20. (This, because their working hours would be the same even if there would be less meals.) This would mean that we would never have a scenario where food payments would cover food costs. We risked a deficit of around a thousand of euros with this decision, but the kitchen collective was tranquil which was our priority. Then in the reception desk we put up a transparent budget and

explained our situation to all participants. There were many people who bought food tickets at our reception desk, so they donated more than the initially announced price. At the end of the day, with extra donations and all the juggling, food paid itself.

There is one crucial aspect that we want to highlight here. If you can include the kitchen collective into your coordination meetings, do it. If they don't want to be involved in the entire process, assign a coordinator to just do liaison with the kitchen but also introduce the entire coordination team to the kitchen collective. See the faces of the people that will be cooking the food, and let them see the faces who are making the decisions. This "humanization" will save you a lot of unnecessary drama.

Funding

Do you have money? We didn't.

When the initial invitations were sent, we had an estimated budget of €60.000 and Climáximo had offered €5.000 . We thought we would just find the money on the way.

Combining three conferences was useful to distribute travel expenses. This added another €4.000 to the equation.

We asked all the endorsing organizations in the Global North to support travel costs for activists in the Global South. We had little response. Then COVID-19 and border restrictions reduced our expenses.

We asked all organizations and special guests to donate us books – books they edited or wrote. We sold them on a donation basis in the reception desk. That gave us another €1.000, more or less.

The trick here is: Food pays itself. You must pay the venue. You must pay the translation equipment. Travel costs – at least for participants from the Global South – have to be

covered. There is nothing else you have to pay. There is always another way.

You don't have to pay to print posters. Supporting organizations can offer that.

You don't have to pay interpreters – unless you insist on professionalism. It is possible to do it with volunteers only.

You don't have to pay for internet connection or Zoom accounts. Organizations have those.

You don't have to pay for graphic design. Organizations have staff or volunteers that can take care of them.

You can always cut costs. The way to do it is not austerity. The way to do it is simplification, creativity and socialization.

Begin by simplifying. Have a base plan that doesn't depend on money. Add optional possibilities and ask around if they are possible to attain without costs or if someone would like to pay especially for one item.

Continue by creativity. Talk about options publicly – in all meetings. Do brainstorming sessions.

Socialize the problem. Create a team and create a political process of engagement. Share responsibility and share

power. Tell your estimated budget to everyone on a regular basis.

Continue socializing the problem until you leave the venue at the end of the conference. Have your budget written and visible in the venue. Ask for donations.

We did the Encounters with a final budget of €23.400 and our balance was even. But we didn't know this would work out, until we counted the coins in the donation box on Sunday night.

Established organizations tend to throw money at problems. That works if you have the money. You can instead throw transformative organizing at the problems. We will talk about this in the Volunteers and Preparatory Meetings section too.

There is so much logistics to worry about. How to survive it?

All conferences have a different context.

We had zero staff. By that we mean not just that the Encounters did not hire anyone, but also that the people in the coordination were themselves volunteers in their respective organizations. Your life might be easier than this.

Venues can also be less precarious where you live.

The movement in your context may be better organized. Maybe there are interpreters' collectives and maybe there are several kitchen collectives, already integrated in the movement. We didn't have those.

There was COVID-19 and we had a well-being team. You definitely need a well-being team, but they may not need so many tests available and instead may focus more on emotional awareness.

Our solution to logistics was team-building. The coordinators were available to help each other, even if a specific crisis was entirely within the mandate of one team. We surfed through difficulties together.

What we did not do (and should have done) was an all-logistics meeting. We should have reserved some 2-3 hours to sit down with all the teams, and patiently go through all the needs of each one of us and make sure we all know who is taking care of which. We did it rather loosely.

There is also a lot of practical chat ("We found a way of making pins! Daniel and I are doing them now at X. Pass by if you have an hour to spare!" kind of messages) and you need a space for that. We used the platform Element.io, other people use Slack for similar purposes.

Create a lot of rooms and establish etiquette for each. Some rooms can be really chatty (poster hanging, banner painting, pamphlet distributing, etc.), while others may be more moderated (rooms where virtually everyone needs to be and everyone needs to read all messages).

Avoid phone calls for coordination. One-on-one conversations increase entropy. If you really have to do a phone call, then make sure you send feedback to everyone with clear information on who you phones, what was the

question, what were the considerations, what was your conclusion, and which one of you will do what and when.

Volunteers and Preparatory Meetings

You will need people.

You will need people for all kinds of stuff. To design images, to distribute pamphlets, to hang posters, to translate the website, to post on social media accounts, to do technical support in online meetings, to make phone calls, to set up the space, to receive people, to clean up the space. You will need people in all the teams, whatever your team structure.

Do not rely on existing resources.

We repeat. Do not relay on existing resources.

We repeat again. Do not relay on existing resources.

An international conference is a space for organizing. It's an opportunity for getting people involved and for political training.

Write down a ladder of engagement. Start with anyone who is looking at you, and write the steps all the way up to coordinating a team. Show the ladder to other coordinators.

Then write down a recruitment plan. Where will you find the people? Why will they be in those places? Why will they join?

Then write down a recruitment timeline. What events will you do? Will you have open meetings? To do what?

We had Portuguese coordination meetings weekly, and we had increasingly more open meetings: during the last weeks of the preparations, we had around two per week.

Do not confuse recruitment with outreach.

The end goal of any event is that the movement is bigger at the end of it than was before the event. That means the organizations involved should get new people in and also build capacity for newbies. Set organizational objectives for the event.

Think in terms of transactional versus transformative. Transactional is when you ask for a favor to someone. That's the mindset of all volunteering projects: reserve one hour of your life and plant a tree, yayy! Do not use a transactional approach unless you are depending on money rather than people. Use a transformative approach: make

people part of the process, give them cognitive support (why is their task or their team crucial for the entire process?), delegate power, and trust them. The objective of organizing is to transform the activists, that they become different people than before, that they feel the power they have in them.

We couldn't do all of these things but in this particular instance we can blame it on the pandemic peak. We did organize a lot of open meetings (offline and online) as well as thematic discussions, but little people showed up and the isolation cycles didn't give us time for team-building. At the end of the day, we worked under-capacity and we had remaining shifts at the beginning of the week of the Encounters.

On that note, do remember that some people will just bail at the last minute. If you build a team, if you get to know them, then… well, they bail just the same, but you already know them and probably tested them in other occasions, so you can prepare for that.

Chat groups don't work. They don't engage newcomers. And those who are already engaged you should invite to an actual meeting.

You can have a temporary WhatsApp/Telegram/Signal group for a specific practical task like hanging posters on Tuesday night, but don't use such groups as an organizing tool.

Briefings and check-ins work.

Last minute briefings are good because you can have everyone in the room for an hour, make sure all the team members know all the essentials, and perhaps even play a little game to break the ice.

Check-ins within a team are useful because you can make crises visible, make people feel heard and accompanied, and also make sure that everyone is at their post and know what comes next.

There is so much to think about. How to get the big picture?

There are many tools that we used and others we unfortunately didn't. But we will list the most effective ones in case you want to look them up.

> Ladder of Engagement, for recruitment and mobilizing

> RACI organizing, for establishing a culture of accountability within the organization

> Six Leadership Styles by Daniel Goleman, for figuring out how to lead a meeting or a team