Summary report on Quality of life
(health, work and housing)

Grupo Ágora

This report reflects the results obtained from the analysis of research data developed by the Agora group of the University of Huelva for the Interculture Map project. The project of the Agora Group is a study of good contemporary intercultural practices in Europe; it was developed thanks to the collaboration of various institutions: amongst them, the Prague Multicultural Centre, the Lai-momo Cooperative in Bologna and the Centre for Intercultural Action in Brussels, as well as the Agora Research Group of the Huelva University. Given the variety of the cultural aspects through which we can look at intercultural initiatives, the project has been divided into themes: The Prague Multicultural Centre focused on media, the Lai-momo Cooperative on art, the Centre for Intercultural Action on education, and the Agora group on work, health and housing. As difficult as it may seem to simultaneously analyse aspects as different as work, health, and housing, in actual fact they revealed themselves to be extremely connected; they are the fundamental elements of a social structure that guarantees a minimum standard, which allows one to speak of such a thing as quality of life.

Keep in mind that at present we are witnessing a growing worry within European society: this concerns the management of interpersonal relations in increasingly multicultural social contexts, mainly because of immigration. This social reality demands that we interrogate the intercultural practices that are being used to organise the coexistence of people of different origins. In our study we will focus in particular on those intercultural practices connected to the quality of life; we will then discuss the relation that can be established between an intercultural initiative and the quality of life.

1 Intercultural initiative

An intercultural initiative aims at promoting the communication between different cultural realities, with the aim of finding a common ground; it's a process that begins with the positive acknowledgment of differences; it is there for the whole population, not just for minority groups, so as to enable co-existence. Since it doesn't see difference as an obstacle, it aims at producing togetherness without deluding itself in looking for

cultural homogenisation; rather, it promotes reciprocal encouragement on the basis of sharing cultural differences.

2 The concept of "Quality of life"

From a macro-social perspective, the concept of Quality of life is not only centred on economic or strictly material conditions: it constitutes itself as an interdisciplinary approach which then takes into account the conditions – objective or subjective – which are relative to the degree of integration and social development of the individual. Only on the basis of available resources which offer basic needs, such as housing, health and work, can we begin to speak of "quality of life" as guaranteeing a minimum basis for the development of the individual in his environment.

In this study, the expression "Quality of life" is used in reference to the intercultural activities that concern mostly health, housing and work, in relation to immigrants. Within each of these areas, intercultural actions emphasise the socio-structural and personal factors that have the biggest impact on the everyday relations between individuals. These areas refer to fundamental human rights and are necessarily implicated in the interaction between individuals of different cultures.

3 The relation between Quality of Life and Interculture

The relation between quality of life and interculture does not necessarily imply positive results. There are past initiatives that have contributed to intensifying social conflict. Nevertheless, the mistakes of the past are there to teach us that one has to approach cultural differences without formulating judgments; furthermore, in order to have a harmonious development between cultures it is necessary to presuppose that a better knowledge and recognition of the cultures we live next to will improve our relations, enriching us as people and as communities.

The areas included in the notion of Quality of life are directly and strongly influenced by the status of each individual in the social structure. In the case of immigrants this is conditioned by situations of precariousness, social injustice and insecurity, which at times determine their social exclusion.

The lack of **work** for immigrants is often the cause and effect of the lack of documents, thus blocking the way to legal employment; this makes them legally invisible towards the authorities, thus encouraging their position on the margins of the law and their exclusion from the social fabric. If you then add cultural differences, which can

complicate immigrant integration in the job sector of the hosting community, the situations for discrimination intensify.

Carrying out social activities, from an intercultural perspective, in the field of employment, encourages the individual to adapt to the workplace, increasing his productivity and his contribution to the hosting community. These factors have a direct impact on the positive perception that the community can have on cultural differences, and encourage an integration that has a positive influence on the quality of life, both of immigrants and of the rest of the community.

The lack of work is also an obstacle to housing: it deprives the individual of the possibility of obtaining documents deriving from his employment. Also, in the case of immigrants, cultural differences make it harder to obtain housing and to coexist harmoniously with individuals of different origins living in the same geographic context.

Being denied hygiene, rest, and protection against the weather renders the immigrants highly vulnerable towards disease, thus diminishing their ability to work. The notion of hygiene is also not the same in all cultures: what some consider repulsive others may see as acceptable. The consideration of the specific traits of a cultural identity in the field of **health** and the development of strategies for intercultural communication have the effect of encouraging a better degree of attention towards the patient, helping to improve the understanding of his situation and to adapt the treatment accordingly.

Subjects without work, housing, or in bad health are perceived by the hosting community as elements that destabilise social harmony; this provokes a vicious cycle where precarious conditions intensify, thus making it harder for there to be integration. For this reason, social interventions with an intercultural approach on the quality of life can empower the social integration of individuals that are excluded because of their difference; these interventions lead to a place of coexistence in which, through intercultural dialogue, it is possible to transcend cultural differences.

4 Good intercultural practices in the field of Quality of life

Let's take as a reference frame the research carried out on projects based on the study of Quality of life: it is possible to sketch a few indicators of something we may call a "Good intercultural practice" in this field.

On the basis of the conclusions reached by this project's partners after a first meeting, a good practice is defined in the following way: it has to be *innovative*, developing new

solutions for common problems; it has to have a tangible *impact* on the living conditions of the individuals it addresses itself to; it has to *exportable and/or repeatable*, so as to represent a point of reference for new initiatives; it has to have a "*sustainable*" effect, contributing to the permanent eradication of situations of conflict; it has to be *flexible* i.e. capable of adapting to unforeseen situations; lastly, it has to be *assessable*, so as that its assessment can be planned from the beginning of the project.

These characteristics, common to any project, also have to be applied to intercultural projects; for this reason, we have kept them in consideration during our research at the moment of selecting the case studies.

But since we couldn't limit ourselves to these, we analysed those projects that not only conformed to the requisites of a good practice, but that also constituted real examples of good intercultural practices, later applying them in the field of research of Quality of life.

In the field of **employment** we can define as intercultural those projects that aim at the following: guidance, the direct search for work by the immigrant community, the promotion of business initiatives, the education on professional aspects, as well as on social, linguistic and legislative skills in the job market of the hosting society.

These initiatives have been carried out by projects such as:

- **TEP**
- **Centros Ariwit**
- **ECRE**
- **Canal solidario**
- **Entra en Xarxa**
- **Crocevia**
- **Participación sindical en los procesos migratorios**
- **Trade union guide for migrant workers**
- **Red-interlabora / Itinerarios de inserción.**

In the field of **health**, the term interculture means that the attention of social-health has to adapt to the reality of immigration, keeping in mind the cultural background and the individual's origins.

These initiatives have been carried out by projects such as

- **Nafsiyat**
- **Tampep**
- **Casa insieme**
- **IMISCOE**

Lastly: to define the relation between interculture and **housing** is more complex, because in this field there are several strictly practical factors (e.g. the necessity of searching for a home on behalf of immigrants) as well as factors that are inherent to the intercultural experience (e.g. the need to prepare the community to face diversity). From our point of view, both types of intervention can be classified as intercultural if one keeps in mind diversity, the position that individuals occupy within the social structure, and the unequal relations that are generated.

These are the aims of projects such as:

- **Baobab**
- **SOZE**
- **Area management for the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Berlin**
- **Conociendo nuestro barrio**
- **Casa insieme**
- **Centro de acogida de mujeres inmigrantes**
- **Iasuk**
- **INTEG.R.A.**

For this reason we can conclude by establishing that to speak of interculture in the field of housing is extremely complex and polemic; it is therefore difficult to start with a precise idea of an intercultural intervention in this field given the disparity of the criteria and the recent arrival of the intercultural paradigm, whose theoretical basis is still openly debated.

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