Developing one's intercultural skills in the course of action
Some practical pointers in view of our field visits
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A short introduction in three stages. First, a word on what has to be meant by this big word "culture". Second, some considerations on " interculture ": what is at stake when we focus on the intercultural dimension? Third, a rough set of resources (mainly questions) that could help structure our activities over the next two days. A first series of resource questions, not all of them. In fact, we are both a group of learning and experimenting organisations. And so we will also produce together our resource questions, mine (as a starter) and yours if necessary.

As we do not have much time, I will be brief: few words, simple words.

1. Culture

1.1. Culture is the realm of two basic elements: differences and implicitness (and invisibility). Let's begin with the **differences**. Differences may be found in a lot of features: difference of sensitivity (the way you feel about), difference of values (the way you attribute relevance or importance, or not), difference of priorities (the way you scaffold or scale what really matters) but also difference of practices (the particular way to do things) and difference of rationality (the way you think about, the way to reason, thus to attribute meaning, or not).

1.2. Difference is at the heart of culture. But beware: **difference is often paradoxical**, because it takes place in real life under the disguise of sameness. Difference appears in the form of sameness. Yes, they look the same, or it seems to be the same. At first glance. But closer inspection or reflection shows that what one has seen as the same thing is in fact not the same thing and perhaps even the opposite. Here is **a first common trap**: it looks the same but it is not the same, not at all. But the reverse is also true. What appears to be different may in fact turn out to be the same.

1.3. **The situation is the source of a second, fairly common trap**. Everything that happens always happens in a particular place, at a particular time, in an always specific context. Never forget to consider the texture, relief and nature of the situation. Every action, every echoing reaction is always situated. Above all, people react to a situation. Not just any situation, but this one, 'here and now'. And they adjust as much as possible. This is where culture reveals various facets and shows variability, precisely because people have to adapt to situations

1.4. Culture is also about the implicit and the unspoken, the second element. Very often we define culture as a stock of unthinking and unthoughts, the kind of things you do without thinking about it because it is so natural. Stock of unthinking means stock of preformulated answers, instant-ready reaction or reply, predisposition, that is, a sort of *"déjà là"* or "already there", sort of tapestry of normality.

1.5. Whether it is difference or similarity is irrelevant. In a particular circumstance, one's culture says what is right, good and desirable, whatever is not wrong or anyway. In other words, culture is always about **rules and norms**. Rules can be defined as everything I must do, I am allowed to do and I am not allowed to do. Norms indicate what is good or bad, ugly or beautiful, desirable or undesirable.

1.6. Culture is not limited to countries, linguistic or ethnic groups. **Any human group can be characterised by a particular way** of relating to the surrounding world and to reality. A family may have its own culture (i.e. its own repertoire of implicit values, norms and rules). The same for any organisation. For any profession. For social classes. For inhabitants of the same neighbourhood. For gender and age group. Any human groups.

1.7. **In the field of culture, the die is never cast once and for all.** The rules and standards in a particular situation are never given. You are supposed to know them. Precisely because you are a member - and actor - of a particular culture: you do things without thinking about them, as if by reflex (this is the "implicit" side of cultural reality). A member of another group would have done things differently (this is the 'difference' side of cultural reality). This is the entry into the field of interculturality: in the same situation, your rules and norms are not the same as theirs, there is divergence or dissonance or disruption.

2. Interculture

2.1. Interculture or interculturality is about the encounter of several cultures and about **how each of them can benefit from this encounter**. Our basic assumption is that the encounter of two or more different cultures is always an opportunity for mutual enrichment. Intercultural situations allow us to discover what is special about us (mirror effect), how diverse and rich the array of possibilities to do the same things can be (scope effect), but also how profound the difference can be between two groups. And this is a chance because differences offer many possibilities for change. Never forget it: differences are resources.

2.2. Intercultural situations also reveal **misunderstandings** (in the precise sense that I mistakenly thought that you thought the same as me). Misunderstandings are both a resource to be valued and a problem to be solved. It is extremely fruitful to discuss these misunderstandings with everyone involved: Why am I so surprised that this can be interpreted in a completely different way to my own? Why is she so surprised that I don't understand her or that she don't understand me? And now what to do with this misunderstanding situation? How can we make the best of it?

2.3. Misunderstandings are part of reality, the visible part. But in the field of interculturality, there is also another part, the **invisible part**. Some values or dispositions that are significant for one group may be invisible (not seen, not conceived, not even imaginable) for another group that interacts with it. This is the first level of invisibility. But there is another, deeper level: entire groups may be invisible. Not only their values, rules and norms, but also, and most importantly, the group as such.

2.4. This can lead to a so-called "**critical incident**", i.e. an incident in a particular situation that makes it possible to see the difference that was invisible and, above all, the groups or sub-groups of people involved and embodying this difference. Quite often these critical incidents look like conflict or tension situations. They are like a disruption in the reality.

But diversity is not simply a matter of groups having and defending different interests. It is not simply a matter of groups having different views. Quite often, their views are who they really are. They will say: "we are that difference". This is why some seemingly minor differences suddenly give rise to tensions or conflicts, thus creating a critical incident. These critical incidents are like windows that open: they show what was hidden, a landscape that was previously ignored. Obvious to one group, invisible to others, but nevertheless crucial, so crucial that it generates tension.

3. Now in practice

In practice, to address this issue, at least a bit, we will proceed in two different but complementary ways: first, raising resource questions, then asking people or groups encountered to tell significant narratives highlighting some aspects of intercultural dynamics.

Resource questions

From the above, a first set of questions or areas of questioning can be roughly deduced. The aim is to increase our competences in the field of intercultural relations on a territorial scale. We want to make them as fruitful as possible. In view of achieving this aim, the idea is to have a first list of resource questions at hand, a list that could help start the exchange. Here under, the questions are organised in rough thematic groups. We do not want to be locked down in a closed list of questions. In the wake of our exchanges and especially when we will be on the spot, this list will be enriched.

3.1.   In general, how the actors we encounter perceive and manage the **interculturality**, i.e. the fact that different groups may hold different and possibly opposing perspectives on the one hand but, on the other hand, and perhaps mainly, also different but converging possibilities of action?

3.2.   **About the differences**. What are the practices, tools, frameworks, rules of the relational game, strategies, experiments or innovations to transform differences into advantages?

3.2.1. To Identify the different categories of actors in the territory regarding the field of action?

3.2.2. To decipher and value differences? For example, what are the means, practices and tools to bring out the resources and strengthen the potential of each category?

3.2.3. To make visible "the invisible"? (people or groups at the margin)

3.2.4. To set out a collective and mutually assumed action (planning, self-organizing, launching operations, assessing, learning together…)?

3.2.5. …

3.3. About the **tensions** and the potential of disagreement, opposition, contradiction or conflict. Same basic question: what are the practices, tools, frameworks, rules of the relational game, strategies, experiments or innovations to transform conflicts or tension into mutual or common advantages?

3.3.1. To transform conflicts into heuristic / fruitful controversies?

3.3.2. To transform conflicts into available resources (at the disposal of creative processes)?

3.3.3. To use conflict as a means of identifying and recognising groups with divergent but potentially enriching perspectives?

3.3.4. To bridge the apparent gap separating these groups with divergent but potentially enriching perspectives? (that means linking differences, not eradicating them, putting them to work and adding value).

3.3.5. …

3.4. About **empathy**, the perspective of understanding others from their own point of view. Always the same basic question: what are the practices, tools, frameworks or devices, rules of the relational game, strategies, experiences or innovations to trigger and to manage empathic processes? According to your experiences.

Productive narratives

Besides raising resource question, narratives provide a second entry-point to address intercultural issues. The idea is to ask people or groups encountered to tell a story. No any story but narratives or stories of actors, people or groups, who have experienced and dealt with intercultural misunderstandings or tensions (critical incidents). Narratives or stories provide a lot of possibilities to raise questions about real life and factful issues. They make the exchanges easier, more concrete and factual.