

The project Villaggio Culturale

Intercultural Co-Creation in Times of Uncertainty

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From 2021 to 2023, young people with diverse life experiences, histories, and educational backgrounds became cultural mediators in a remote area of Switzerland's border to Italy. The main protagonists were the so-called storytellers – a group of 40–50 people, primarily of Afghan origin, along with arts students from Northern Switzerland and Germany (Stocker 2021). Meeting once a month in Terra Vecchia in Centovalli/Ticino, an area accessible only by foot, they engaged in different forms of artistic interactions, from creating songs to inventing theatre scenes or making art together. Alternating groups of unaccompanied minors and other refugees, children, teenagers, families, and school classes joined them in this endeavour. Starting in 2024, the model project entered its next phase under the umbrella of *Musikvermittlung Schweiz*¹ [Music Mediation Switzerland], expanding the successful initiative into a large-scale intercultural project throughout Switzerland.

A diverse society needs space and time for encounters, both in the real and figurative sense (Rosken 2015). The intercultural project *Villaggio Culturale* is an example of how a thoughtful interplay of place, time, participants, and methods can help people from extremely different backgrounds come together, forming a diverse group that learns from each other through the arts. The *Villaggio Culturale* project positions itself as a constantly evolving platform for learning how to engage in intercultural work and co-creation. Regular intensive reflection with a focus on intersectionality forms the basis for the continuous development of this complex social system (Biele Mefebue, Bührmann, and Grenz 2022). Such a process needs time in order to enable people – professional and non-professional artists, individuals with and without refugee backgrounds, and students from different artistic and non-artistic disciplines – who would otherwise seldom meet, to create songs, dances, and theatre scenes together and perform them in schools, asylum centres, public concerts, and community events. The

1 See <https://musikvermittlungschweiz.ch/> (accessed April 22, 2025).

project can be discussed as an example of whether and with which methods decolonisation can be implemented on cultural, artistic, and social levels (Meling, Fadnes, and Mittner 2023).

Preamble from the First-person Perspective

Where silence blooms. Like a flight of souls together with the diversity of beautiful thoughts and nationalities, the different languages and dialects, the presence of rich and fascinating cultures, the precious feeling of love and humanity, art and mutual acceptance. These are all feelings that I have experienced during this project and that are dear, precious, and unforgettable to me. They touch souls that seem to have known each other for years. I love you. (Esmat, *Villaggio Culturale* participant)

Is it possible to construct a paradise²? And what ingredients does it take to do so? I asked myself this question for the first time as I stood in a small, completely empty village in the Ticino mountains in 2020, knowing that this was a unique situation in the world. It was the first day of the lockdown, and I was given the chance to create from scratch a community that could serve as an exemplary society in a place that was only accessible by foot, in the middle of the forest, seemingly occupied by nothing and nobody. How I imagine Noah must have felt when, guided by the dove of peace, he set foot on solid ground after many days of uncertainty and started all over again with a team of very different creatures. The result of this is what we, later generations, are currently experiencing: a ruined world whose foundations of life have been largely destroyed by the human species. But the hope of being able to start over again has been with us since Noah. That is why I tried. And that is why I would like to encourage other cultural mediators to give it a try, with some transferable insights from the *Villaggio Culturale* project.

Location

One of the first young Afghans who came to the empty village as a co-thinker put it this way: that these shapes of roofs, which he knew from online games, had been the symbol of protection and safety for him and that he had always longed to one day live in a country with saddle roofs instead of flat roofs (Schnell

2 The image of paradise here does not refer to a biblical concept, but to a term originally from ancient Iranian that describes an enclosed park as the centre of a healing living space.

2018). To start an intercultural project, a place that represents safety is what is needed first and foremost. Whether the safety of a specific place is evoked by pitched roofs, old stone walls, historic buildings, a lovely design, or green surroundings is of secondary importance. But in the world of uncertainty in which most participants in an intercultural project find themselves, the factor of safety is crucial.

After having experienced the village of Terra Vecchia for several years, other factors that contribute to its being an 'ideal place' are a certain simplicity, the availability of retreat options, and that – in addition to at least one spacious room for artistic co-creation – there are facilities for communal cooking, eating, sleeping, dancing, and playing. However, a place becomes a meeting space not only because of the communal and retreat options, but also because it can be shielded from the rest of the world at any time and turned into a safer space. Only then does a place become a protected space where you can show yourself, where you can be heard and seen, where you can empathise with others and learn from one another. So it takes a certain place to form a community, but with which people can you create a space where people do not have to be socially afraid of one another?

Group

To create an almost paradisiacal place, you first need to create a group that works together in a careful and conscious way. The primary focus is on achieving maximum diversity and inclusion (Liebau 2015), even though, initially, there is a need to establish some degree of homogeneity and associated exclusivity, which may seem paradoxical. Additionally, a fluid structure around a fixed core group, as well as hierarchies that are as flat as possible also play a role (Weber 2018). Dimensions that can be transferred to other intercultural projects from the case of *Villaggio Culturale* include age, origin, skills, gender, education, language, and life experiences. Representatives of the relevant dialogue groups were brought into the planning and implementation team right at the beginning for the dimensions of origin, life experiences, and language: young people with a refugee background, young people from different arts backgrounds, and young people from different language regions within multilingual Switzerland.³ For the gender dimension, young women with a refugee biography were a partic-

3 Juliet Hess (2015) rightly points out that representatives with diverse backgrounds must be included from the outset to prevent tokenism.

ularly difficult group to reach and could only be included during the course of the project by establishing a women's space.

Along with origin – which over time focused primarily on Afghans and Swiss – the levels of education and life experience varied significantly and influenced each other reciprocally. This group characteristic was then used as an extremely fruitful driving force in the method: some have something to tell, the others can make the stories told visible and audible (Micieli and Weber 2021). Initially, there was a deliberate restriction on diversity in terms of age: apart from the team members, only people between the ages of 20 and 30 were included in the project. This exclusivity had the function of creating a connecting element between people from sometimes extremely different backgrounds and was loosened as the project progressed – partly because the participants in the core group were themselves getting older and because the women who joined over time needed to take their children with them.

To give a provisional answer to the question posed at the beginning, about the creation of a paradise, the initial targeted composition of a group certainly plays a central role. It must subsequently be possible to renegotiate this again and again, so that a fluid, plastic, constantly changing structure emerges, in which there is a balance between participants who are permanent, those who have newly joined, and those who are leaving. However, one question remains: What does such a diverse group do in such a secluded place and how does it connect with the outside world?

Method

The arts have a clear function in the *Villaggio Culturale* project and are used as a creative activity that makes the characteristics and peculiarities of the place and the group visible and audible. These are the history and stories behind the village and the region, some of which have astonishing parallels with Afghan stories (Weber 2022). They are oral traditions beyond the written word, which can be combined with the arts on non-verbal levels in a variety of ways. And they are the very different aesthetics which are inherent in the arts and cultural forms, are mutually enriching and stimulate discourse between the participants. Initially, the creative processes were led by people from the fields of culture and social work – over time, it became possible for the resulting formats to be adopted by the younger participants, as tried-and-tested processes and as templates for their own workshops, outside the village and with external participants, and also applied in new variations:

We work with the media of creative writing, (movement) theatre, and music. Each person is an expert. We learn from and with each other, to express our experiences, our thoughts, and our stories. Our aim is not only to guide groups but to encourage them to become artistically active themselves, to take responsibility, and to develop individual forms of expression. (Zoë, *Villaggio Culturale* team member)

Today, the team consists of young people from diverse cultural backgrounds who use co-creative artistic methods to convey cultural assets from different countries and to share them with other young people, as well as with a diverse audience in Switzerland. The members of the organisational collective know one another from several years of development, and work as a well-coordinated team, with a good communication culture and efficient implementation skills. Individual team members are responsible for the creation and implementation of a women's space while others are responsible for theatre and play development or the mediation between the Afghan and Swiss languages and cultures (Weber 2023). A young singer and singing teacher leads the work on voice, composition, and the choir, and a young ethnologist and cultural mediator enriches the team with inputs on intersectionality and post-colonial structures in cultural work. In the field of creative writing, the team draws on the experience of all those involved in the project so far, who are very familiar with the method of storytelling and its transformation into various artistic and performative formats. The boundaries between the respective disciplines are fluid and the participants support each other with inputs, performances, and mediation work (Weber 2019). If necessary, external artists and cultural mediators are invited for specific workshops.

In addition to experimentally tested processes, informal elements such as dancing, cooking, games, and repeated discussions and mediation both internally and externally are also required. This raises the legitimate question of whether a project with such a high standard can even be realised in terms of time and if so, how.

Time

In terms of location, group composition, and method, an artistic-social project that wants to seriously address intersectionality and decolonisation needs, above all else, time (Biele Mefebue, Bührmann, and Grenz 2022). It needs a long research phase, several years of development, reflection formats and in this particular project: regular weekends, choir rehearsals, as well as rehearsal blocks for performances. Thus, the *Villaggio Culturale* project began with a one-

year research phase in which the initiator of the project lived on-site, learned the language, talked to the local population, read up on historical information, and invited representatives of the dialogue groups to the village for several days as consultants. This resulted in a concept for a three-year development phase, in which the project was carried out from the beginning of May to the end of October each year in a complex structure of monthly residencies, monthly weekends for the core group, weekly stays of external groups, regular invitations extended to the local population, and public performances in the village and the surrounding area (Gordon and Weber 2022).

Already in the first year of the project, it became clear that the concentrated joint artistic work and intensive encounters over a longer period had a great lasting impact on the young people involved, extending into their personal lives. For the locals too – some of whom initially expressed fears about ‘the foreigners’ – there was a clear benefit because of the fact that something was going on again in the previously empty village and there were young people on site. The most important transferable lesson for other intercultural projects: Building relationships and alleviating fears takes considerably more time than cultural mediation projects typically allow (Weber 2019).

In the two years that followed, the project was continuously expanded as more and more people with a high level of commitment to the cause were willing to take part. After the start-up phase, the project became so well established that it also worked outside this location. The team members now hold artistic workshops with the core group over at least six weekends at various locations in Switzerland, involving asylum centres, music schools, and communities in their programme. In parallel, they lead intercultural choirs and theatre groups, some of which are based on the templates produced during the development years, such as a songbook (Micieli and Weber 2022) or a collection of texts (Micieli and Weber 2021), to facilitate encounters within and outside their own culture and language through artistic co-creation.

The last and perhaps most important question which can also be applied to other intercultural projects often only becomes apparent once the project has fully developed. That is why it is particularly challenging and always involves a great deal of learning: How can quality and professionalism be guaranteed in an intercultural project with a high experimental component?

Reflection

As intersectionality research shows, structural changes can only be made if the problems are seen and not negated. It is therefore necessary to go through painful processes, to uncover privilege and underprivilege and to create possible structural changes in response. Adopting an intersectional perspective in cultural mediation work poses various challenges. (Anna, *Villaggio Culturale* team member)

In order not to miss out on current discourses, such as an intersectional or a decolonisation perspective in an intercultural project, a great deal of learning and unlearning is required, which is associated with extensive joint and individual reflection. In terms of practical work as a cultural mediator, this means constantly acquiring knowledge about various forms of discrimination and undergoing further training to reflect on oneself and one's own behaviour. In addition to various feedback formats with all participants and analysis by experts from other disciplines, the *Villaggio Culturale* project was therefore scientifically accompanied in its third year of development by Anna Sofie Gebhardt, a young cultural mediator, for a whole year, as part of her Master thesis at Karlsruhe University of Education (Gebhardt 2023). In a study that focused on structural racism and intersectionality, Gebhardt conducted 11 qualitative interviews with representatives of all participating groups and carried out several phases of participant observation. Her results show that it can be very helpful to look at such a project from an intersectional perspective. The arts in particular often lack the awareness “that all social dynamics are integrated into power structures, which are reflected, for example, in the arts and cultural sector in a lack of access and are thus currently often reserved for only a part of our society” (ibid., 96) and “that people who hold a position of power in the social structure bear the responsibility for these processes of change, as they can initiate these processes.” (ibid., 96). In her summary, Gebhardt states that this claim was fulfilled in the *Villaggio Culturale* project because, among other things, a broad concept of culture was applied. Furthermore, she found that important factors for professionalism and quality in the field of intercultural cultural mediation are sustainability and future orientation, systematic feedback methods and adaptations, equal access to the arts and encounters through art for all participants, learning and change processes, flat hierarchies, and the influence of the location. (ibid.)

Coda

This brings us back to the beginning: it all started in and with a certain place. We came together again and again, from very distant regions of the world, in this tiny place in the middle of the forest and learned, laughed, cried, sang, and discussed. And we have impressively experienced the central role that the arts can play in the peaceful coexistence of a diverse society:

I've been in Switzerland for over five years and I have to admit that life here as an asylum seeker is a bit difficult. Nice things rarely happen in our lives. Fortunately, I got to know Terra Vecchia about a year ago. (Cetin, *Villaggio Culturale* participant)

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