



# Intercultural and digital experience, essential levers for youth engagement?

A production of the European Union-funded Connexion-s project. This intercultural project, which began in May 2022, is supported by the French organization Engagé-e-s & Déterminé-e-s, alongside three international partner organizations: Eclodio (Belgium), the Tunisian Forum for Youth Empowerment (Tunisia) and Coalition SEGA (Northern Macedonia).



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## Abstract(s)

«Knowledge of a culture allows it to be understood, and therefore potentially loved and enjoyed. This acceptance seems much more beneficial and richer than locking oneself into what one already knows and turning in on oneself.»

We owe this quote to a participant in the Connexion-s project. Our approach focuses on exploring the various perspectives of interculturality as perceived, experienced and shaped by different actors: be they scientists, politicians, civil society or, more specifically, young people and youth workers. We will look at the intercultural experience as lived by young people, highlighting key aspects such as mobility, the digital and intercultural communication. Our aim is to analyze the extent to which interculturality, particularly when facilitated by digital technology, can inspire deeper engagement among young people.

"الكثير فيه عنا المختلف الآخر بثقافة والقبول. بها والتعلق الاهتمام وتعزز بفهمهما تسمح معينة ثقافة معرفة إن " الأخرين عن والانعزال الذات عن الانغلاق عكس والثراء الفوائد من

في توجهنا ارتكز لقد . Connexions روابط مشروع في المشاركات احدي تدخل من العبارات هذه اقتبسنا لقد وتشكيلها وتصورها إدراكها يتم كما الثقافي التنوع لمسألة المتنوعة النظر وجهات استكشاف على المشروع هذا المجتمع نشطاء أو السياسيين أو العلمي البحث في بالمشغلين الأمر تعلق سواء الفاعلين مختلف قبل من الشباب قطاع في والعاملين الشباب وخاصة المدني

مثل المهمة الجوانب من مجموعة على الضوء تسليط مع ويتمثلها الشباب يراها كما الثقافي التنوع بمسألة سنهتهم الثقافات بين والتواصل الرقمية والتكنولوجيا التنقل

بين التفاعل تعزيز في تسهم أن الرقمية للتكنولوجيا يمكن مدى أي إلى :التالية الإشكالية في البحث هو هدفنا أعمق؟ بشكل الثقافي التنوع بقضية الشباب التزام وتعزيز الثقافات

„Познавањето на културата ни овозможува да ја разбереме, а со тоа и потенцијално да ја сакаме и цениме. Ова прифаќање изгледа многу покорисно и побогато отколку да бидеме затворени само во она што веќе го знаеме и да се повлечеме во себе.“

Овој цитат му го должиме на еден од учесниците во проектот Connexion. Нашиот пристап се фокусираше на истражување на различните перспективи на интеркултуралноста онака како што се перципира, доживува и обликува од страна на различни актери: без разлика дали се научници, политичари, граѓанско општество или, поконкретно, млади луѓе и младински работници. Ќе го погледнеме интеркултурното искуство како што го живеат младите луѓе, фокусирајќи се на клучните аспекти како што се мобилноста, дигиталната и интеркултурната комуникација. Нашата цел е да го анализираме степенот до кој интеркултуралноста може да инспирира подлабок ангажман кај младите луѓе, особено кога таа е олеснета од дигиталната технологија.

« La connaissance d'une culture permet sa compréhension et donc un potentiel amour et intérêt. Cette acceptation semble beaucoup plus bénéfique et riche qu'un enfermement dans ce qu'on connaît déjà et que le repli sur soi. »

Cette citation, nous la devons à une participante du projet Connexion-s. Notre approche pour cette production se concentre sur l'exploration des diverses perspectives de l'interculturalité telles qu'elles sont perçues, vécues et façonnées par différents acteurs : qu'il s'agisse de scientifiques, de politiciens, de la société civile ou plus particulièrement des jeunes et des travailleurs de jeunesse. Nous nous pencherons sur l'expérience interculturelle telle qu'elle est vécue par les jeunes, en mettant en lumière des aspects clés tels que la mobilité, le numérique et la communication interculturelle. Notre objectif est d'analyser dans quelle mesure l'interculturalité, notamment lorsqu'elle est facilitée par le numérique, peut susciter un engagement plus profond de la jeunesse.

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# I. Introduction

## Background

This study was carried out as part of the Connexion-s project, funded by the European Union. This intercultural project, which began in May 2022, is supported by the French organization Engagé-e-s & Déterminé-e-s, alongside three international partner organizations: Eclosio (Belgium), the Tunisian Forum for Youth Empowerment (Tunisia) and Coalition SEGA (Northern Macedonia).

Connexion-s is designed to be co-constructed with its young participants through intercultural face-to-face and online seminars. The aim: for these young people to seize on the themes of interculturality, digital and civic engagement to imagine and design responsible and inclusive digital alternatives to face-to-face intercultural experiences when these are not possible or preferred. Above all, the group will be able to learn from these experiences to create relevant and comprehensive tools that provide answers to the problems, limitations and issues raised. At the end of the project, a best practice guide and a toolbox should be created. These two products are intended to enable other young people and local and international organizations to organize and manage intercultural encounters using relevant digital tools.

At the same time, our organizations are seeking to better understand how young people in the four Connexion-s countries<sup>1</sup> perceive intercultural experience and the impact it can have on their lives. As a first output of this project, we carried out a multi-country survey to explore young people's intercultural experiences, and in particular to identify obstacles, their motivations for intercultural experiences, and to analyze the extent to which digital technology could be of use. In this study, the second output of the project, we will present the results of the questionnaire<sup>2</sup> and discuss them in the light of research on these themes. Our approach for this study is to explore definitions by individuals and groups of individuals who think, live and do interculturality: scientists, politicians, civil society, and more specifically young people and youth workers<sup>3</sup>.

We'll start with a scientific definition of interculturality, compared with related sociological constructs. We will then analyze the ways in which individuals are led and encouraged to interact, notably through European and national policies. Then we'll look at the intercultural experience as lived by young people, highlighting key aspects such as mobility, digital technology and intercultural communication. Our aim is to analyze the extent to which interculturality, particularly when facilitated by digital technology, can inspire greater engagement among young people. Finally, we will share the recommendations co-constructed within the Connexion-s project in terms of interculturality, mobility and digital technology to foster youth engagement.

## Methodology

This qualitative study, based on our experience in civic education, the specific features of the project and its participants, was complemented by a review of the scientific literature, analysis of internal documents from partner and non-partner associations, and an examination of local and European policies. We also consulted members of civil society. It is important to note that this literature review does not claim to be exhaustive. Indeed, we have enriched our reflection by drawing our information both from the Connexion-s project itself and from external sources. Following a common line taken by the four organizations, each of them managed the research process according to the specific context of its country. On this initial basis, we built our argument. Our full list of references appears at the end of this document.

Our resources include the results of the survey mentioned above, as well as interviews with Youth Workers and young

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1. For the sake of brevity, we've taken the liberty of using «four countries» to refer to Belgium, France, Northern Macedonia and Tunisia, the countries from which the four Connexion-s partner organizations come.

2. The results of the survey can be consulted here : <https://www.engagees-determinees.org/medias/FinalversionENG.pdf>

3. For the purposes of this project, and in the interests of standardization across countries and future translations, we use the term «youth worker» to refer to people who work with and for young people. This more encompassing term refers to the realities of the countries covered by the survey, such as youth leader, youth educator, teacher, youth worker, youth supervisor, etc.



people, some of whom had participated in the Connexion-s project, in the four countries represented. We also conducted interviews with specialists in interculturality and sought out resources more specific to national contexts. The aim was to complete our initial research findings and submit them to these experts for their opinions and reactions.

The project also enabled us to reflect on our own positioning with regard to interculturality and digital technology. We drew lessons from previous projects, as well as from our ongoing experience with the Connexion-s project.

For our literary review, we used both online and offline resources. Our offline resources are excerpts from books. The online content consists of resources found by searching for the key terms of the study - «interculturality», «mobility», «engagement», «internet» - in several databases. We searched for the first three words separately, one after the other. We did not include «internet» in this first phase, as we assumed it was too broad in itself to find relevant references. We then combined the four terms into a single search request. The databases consulted were as follows: APA PsycInfo, Cairn, Sociological Abstracts, APA PsychArticles. When we needed information on associations, we visited their websites and harvested their internal capitalizations via each association. As regards national policies, we consulted accessible government texts from Belgium, France, Northern Macedonia and Tunisia. As a key partner in large-scale initiatives such as the Connexion-s project, we examined European policies and their potential impact on national policies.

## Limits

During this first stage of the literature review, several difficulties were encountered by the teams from the various organizations involved in this project.

One of the major challenges was the scarcity of scientific literature specifically focused on the definition of interculturality adapted to the national contexts under study. For Belgium, the diversity of policies stemming from a distinct past (colonial relations, waves of migration, etc.) necessitated a cautious extrapolation based on French literature. This lack of resources was also observed for France. Most of the work on this subject dates back to the 90s and 2000s, and is often cross-referenced. For the literature review on Tunisia, a particular difficulty concerned the origin of the sources. Most of them come from Western researchers or decision-makers. The few Tunisian articles dealing with interculturality are generally based on Western definitions. This is mainly due to the scarcity and limited online accessibility of social science research in Tunisia. In addition, national discourse and state policies on interculturality have presented challenges. Interculturality does not appear to be a priority in the development of national strategies and cooperation in Tunisia, unlike in several European countries, although the European Union is encouraging the implementation of similar programs in Tunisia.

As regards the definition of interculturality, we had to rely on related concepts such as «multiculturalism» or «diversity», given the limited use of the term in different countries. We observed variations in vocabulary. Also, translations from and into any of the four languages used in this project (Macedonian, Arabic, French, English) may have suffered from a loss of nuance. Thus, we have also used sources in which interculturality can be perceived - on the basis of the definitions proposed in this document -, identified in policies without the concept being used as such.

Related challenges lie in our aspiration to reflect the realities of the four partner countries. Surveying and comparing diverse realities has been an arduous task, making it complex to establish inclusion/exclusion criteria to define a common or at least comparable corpus.

The distinction between resources associated with the associative and political sectors also posed a problem. This could be explained by the fact that the associative sector is often dependent on political decisions, although it can function as and is an undeniable counter-power. It's worth noting, by the way, the large number of associative writings on interculturality in Belgium. To illustrate these difficulties, in North Macedonia, the predominant definition of interculturality is that proposed by the Council of Europe. Most documents focus on intercultural learning and education in the context of the country's educational reform. At the political level, the documents relate mainly to the national strategy for the idea of a «single society» and interculturalism from 2019, under the aegis of the government of NR Macedonia. Before 2019, interculturalism, perceived as a cross-cutting issue, had no precise definition

in policy. Multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue are frequently mentioned in various educational and scientific documents.

More generally, at European policy level, we found that the term «interculturality» is rarely used in policies, even though it is central to and encouraged in many projects such as Connexion-s. In short, the study of divergent realities made the review and writing of this study complex, forcing us to establish criteria for grouping information. In order to preserve as many nuances as possible, we will be careful to specify what falls within a multi-country dimension and what more specifically concerns one or more particular countries.

## II. Defining interculturality

Before discussing young people's experiences of interculturality, we propose a scientific definition of the concept. We frequently use the imperative only to decipher the criteria of interculturality, and not because it represents an ideal to be attained.

According to most definitions, interculturality, or multiculturalism, can be conceived as a desire to establish equal opportunities between individuals from different cultural backgrounds through exchanges (Hammouche, 2008). The term «exchanges» should be understood as an attempt at contact, which need not be motivated by any objective other than socialization. It has nothing to do with its commercial connotation. Several criteria must be taken into account to qualify this interaction as an intercultural experience, the first being a climate of mutual respect. Interlocutors must accept each other. This does not necessarily mean that they are ready to embrace an unfamiliar culture. Interculturality does not encourage the abandonment of respective beliefs, values or traditions. On the contrary, it advocates the preservation of these conceptions. It simply encourages people to add new elements to their previous references. This amalgamation accelerates the natural pace of a culture's evolution.

Indeed, the notion of culture is often wrongly perceived as a static, unchanging set of characteristics, values or practices. In reality, however, culture is a dynamic, fluid phenomenon that constantly evolves through time and interactions between individuals. Culture is «moving» in the sense that it is not fixed, but transforms and redefines itself according to social, economic and political contexts and personal interactions. A crucial aspect of this dynamic is intercultural interaction. When people from different cultures interact, they exchange and negotiate meanings, values and practices, thus contributing to the evolution of their own culture and that of others. This cultural fluidity makes analysis and understanding of culture at any given moment both valuable and temporary, as what is relevant and true in one particular context may change in another. What's more, each individual brings his or her own interpretation and understanding of his or her culture, adding another layer of complexity to cultural dynamics. Cultures cannot therefore be «fixed» in a single reality, as they reflect the lived experiences, interpretations and ongoing interactions of the individuals who make them up. Analyzing a culture at a particular point in time offers a snapshot of this complex dynamic, but it's crucial to recognize that it's only one image in a continuous stream of change and evolution. Appreciation of the shifting nature of culture is essential to effectively navigating the contemporary intercultural landscape, whether in social or professional contexts. Interculturality, by recognizing and valuing this cultural fluidity, provides the tools to engage in fruitful dialogues and build enriching relationships in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

Thus, a second condition is that people engage in intercultural dialogue with the intention of meeting a person rather than the group to which they belong (Kulakowski, 2011). Recognition of this belonging plays an important role. It provides the basis for interaction. However, participants must not deny the unique history that also makes up the representative of the other culture. To use an analogy, this dialogue allows us to discover a new perspective through a lens, but the main object of importance must remain the lens, not what it reveals. According to Abdellah-Preteille, in this analogy, there is an even greater source of interest: the observer. This exchange must be accompanied by a self-reflexivity about one's relationship to the unknown other.

These two rules distinguish multiculturalism from comparable sociological constructs. Multiculturalism takes into account diversity within society, including ethnicity, language, religion, heritage and socio-economic conditions. What's more, it sees these differences as riches, and rejects the idea of a «dominant, unified culture». The condition of mutual respect is also present, but multiculturalism does not encourage contact between members of different groups.

Another sociological construct, assimilationism, suggests adherence to a dominant culture. In this context, the term «dominant» is limited to a sense of uniqueness, not coercion or superiority. It implies, for those who join it, renouncing their initial culture. This stance towards foreign components is at odds with interculturalism (Maclure, 2010, cited by Boucher & Maclure, 2018). However, both notions aim to create a universal set of values linked to respect. However, the characteristics they attribute to respect may vary.

Finally, cultural pluralism tends to limit the expression of divergent cultures to the private sphere where they can be expressed (Furco, 2014), the public sphere being governed by a set of abstract norms. Cultural differences are thus accepted but separated.

## Interculturality, a global paradigm

During our literature review, we were alert to possible differences between the definitions conveyed specifically in the four countries involved in the project. We consulted university publications for Belgium, France and Tunisia, and textbook contents for Northern Macedonia. No fundamental differences were found, even though they refer to specific contexts (schools, for example) and are similar to one or other of the sociological constructs mentioned above.

It is interesting to note, however, that Rafoni (2003) studied the gradual introduction of the concept in the 1970s. In France in particular, he was initially confronted with the ambient assimilationism prescribed by the egalitarian values inherent in the French republic (Rafoni, 2003). Indeed, it was hardly conceivable to admit that different cultures existed in the country, since the constitution asserts that all citizens are equal. The author explains that the emergence of interculturality can be associated with two factors: the end of colonialism and the expectation of a shock with the arrival of migrants (Hammouche, 2008; Rafoni, 2003). This angle differs greatly from the origin given by the European Union, which traces it back to the expansion of the liberal democratic paradigm. This economic and social model emphasizes the recognition of each individual's rights and freedom. It allows greater permeability of borders within the continent. In retrospect, it's not surprising to find researchers recommending a shift away from multiculturalism and towards interculturality. Interculturality is more in line with the visible evolution of Western societies (Hammouche, 2008).

Contemporary Western societies manifest themselves as multicultural entities, a reality that sociologists emphasize is not recent, especially in the European context. However, what distinguishes the current era is the actualization of this cultural plurality in contemporary political and economic spheres. According to Touraine (1999), the turn of the 1960s marked an era of significant transformations in collective life, propelled by the emergence of new social actors and new demands. These transformations, while impacting individuals, resonate globally across the planet, stimulated by economic globalization, the internationalization of culture, and the rise of intercommunication technologies (Le Télémaque, 2015). In this evolved context, interculturality has extended beyond traditional cultural interactions into pragmatic fields such as marketing, management, team communication, psychology and personal skills development.

Intercultural understanding is crucial in marketing to develop campaigns that resonate with a diversity of audiences while respecting their cultural values and preferences. It also facilitates fruitful collaboration in management and teamwork dynamics, helping to navigate cultural differences. Intercultural communication, meanwhile, is central to managing relationships in an increasingly globalized business environment. Interculturality also serves as a compass for psychological practitioners to understand and respect the diverse cultural frameworks influencing individual behavior and well-being. Moreover, the development of intercultural skills, such as open-mindedness and flexibility, is crucial to personal and professional development in a world where intercultural interactions have become the norm. In short, interculturality, in its practical applications, enriches not only social interaction but also performance and efficiency in the professional world.

Because interculturality is rooted in modern democracy, it normally involves political measures (Hammouche, 2008). These policies must encourage opportunities for contact between people from different cultures. As Touihri (2021) points out, interculturality also has implications for the education sector. It requires schools to value the diversity of their students, while bringing them to the same level of appropriation of common codes (Kerzil, 2002).

### III. Interculturality and European policies

At this point, we can agree on an initial scientific definition: interculturalism, in comparison with related concepts, goes further by placing great importance on cultural differences through «exchanges, reciprocity and dialogue to create links between cultures». In this sense, given that cultural differences often overlap with socio-economic gaps, interculturalism aims to create equal opportunities for different «cultural groups» through reconciliation and safeguarding (Furco, 320).

But what about policies and their impact on the way groups interact?

As the Connexion-s project was funded by the European Union, it seemed logical to us to look at the policies orchestrated by the European Union and their relationship to the national policies of the four countries that concern us. The occurrence of the word «interculturality» associated with the Council of Europe led us to take an interest.

As a reminder, the Council of Europe and the European Union are two distinct entities. The Council of Europe, founded in 1949, is an international organization dedicated to promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. The European Union, on the other hand, is a unique economic and political union of 27 European countries. The two organizations have different memberships, objectives and structures, although they share certain values and cooperate in certain areas.

#### The Council of Europe, pioneer of interculturalism

The concept of interculturalism was introduced in the 1970s by the Council of Europe, with the aim of improving teaching in schools with growing numbers of children from immigrant backgrounds (Verlot & Suijs, 2000). Antonio Perotti, in his book «Plaidoyer pour l'interculturel» (1994), highlights the pioneering role played by the Council of Europe in the 1980s, envisaging the necessary «interculturalization» of European societies in the face of their multicultural reality.

In the international context, interculturalism is driven by the Council of Europe as an organization dedicated to the protection of human rights. In 2008, this organization published the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, stating that «the challenge of living together in a diverse society can only be met if we can live together in dignity and as equal individuals» (Council of Europe, 2008). In the same document, «intercultural dialogue refers to the open and dignified exchange of opinions between individuals and groups of different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, based on mutual understanding and respect».

Coinciding with the publication of this document, the European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union, declared 2008 the Year of Intercultural Dialogue. As part of the 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the Committee of the Regions (CoR)<sup>4</sup> encouraged member states to integrate cultural dialogue into the legislative work of their national and regional parliaments, particularly in the fields of education and culture (European Union, 2006). This recommendation aimed to highlight and promote the importance of intercultural dialogue through local initiatives, in order to encourage understanding and cooperation between the different cultures present within the EU.

In general, in many EU and Council of Europe documents, interculturalism is associated with values such as human rights, democracy, the culture of peace and dialogue, and European identity.

Indeed, membership of the Council of Europe represents a commitment to common values in the fields of human rights, democracy and the rule of law for member countries. The Council of Europe, Europe's oldest organization, brings together 47 member countries that share these common values. One of its most important bodies is the Euro-

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4. The European Committee of the Regions is the European Union's assembly of local and regional representatives, giving sub-national authorities a direct voice in the EU's institutional system.



pean Court of Human Rights, established in 1959, which delivers judgments on individual or state applications for violations of any of the articles of the European Convention on Human Rights (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

## The European Union and its influence

It's worth noting that all four countries in our study have links with the European Union and the Council of Europe. There is no doubt, therefore, that these ties have enabled European policies to influence national policies.

France's links with the EU date back to the European Economic Community in 1957: it is a founding member of the European Union (created in 1993 with the Maastricht Agreement). France presided over the EU Council for the last time in the first half of 2022. Alongside Germany, the country has endeavored to play a leading role within the organization.

Belgium, also a founding member of the European Union (EU), is home to several of its central institutions, including the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, in Brussels. As a member, Belgium plays an active role in EU policy formulation and decision-making. The relationship between Belgium and the EU is characterized by close integration, reflecting Belgium's commitment to European integration and regional cooperation. EU membership also has a significant impact on Belgian domestic and foreign policy, as well as on its economy.

Tunisia, as a neighboring country of the EU, benefits from various programs and partnership agreements with the EU. These relations are framed mainly by the European Neighborhood Policy, which promotes economic, political and social cooperation. Tunisia participated in this during the 2017-2020 period. Following this period, from 2021, the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI - GE) has framed EU cooperation with Tunisia (European Commission, 2021).

Finally, Northern Macedonia, although not yet a member of the EU, has established substantial relations with it since gaining candidate status in 2005. The EU is the country's main political and economic partner (and largest donor and investor). Cooperation and financial aid cover a wide range of areas and have a lasting impact on people's lives, businesses and the environment. The EU actively supports reforms in North Macedonia aimed at strengthening the rule of law and public administration with a view to future EU membership (Webalkans, n.d.). On November 9, 1995, the Republic of Macedonia, as it was then called, became a full member of the Council of Europe, as the organization's 38th member country. This membership marked a significant commitment to common European values, strengthening Macedonia's position on the European stage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

## Mobility programs for young people

Within the European Union, the «Twinning» program was set up between towns in member states in 1998, under the responsibility of the European Commission. In France, the DRAJES (Délégation régionale académique à la jeunesse, à l'engagement et aux sports) works to promote youth mobility outside the school environment, using European and international programs to support youth policies, in partnership with associations and local authorities. DRAJES is thus committed to the three pillars of the European youth strategy, promoting a policy of solidarity, commitment and citizenship (development of autonomy, initiative, commitment, citizenship and interculturality), in addition to the policy of educational and supervised mobility for students (European and International Youth Mobility, n.d.). In Belgium, the International Youth Bureau (BIJ) offers various programs to encourage youth mobility, covering a variety of fields such as education, sport, entrepreneurship, the arts, active citizenship and European identity, in line with the pillars of the European youth strategy. Belgium, via the BIJ, also encourages youth mobility and intercultural exchanges at local, regional and international levels (BIJ, n.d.).

On the other hand, EU cooperation with Tunisia and Northern Macedonia does not appear to be directly linked to the intercultural dialogue initiatives mentioned in the EU document for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008. However, we can assume that Tunisia has been encouraged by the Council of Europe, with which it has been cooperating since 2012. In addition, the EU supports Tunisia in its democratic process and economic reforms, aimed

at promoting stability and sustainable development in the region. Relations between the European Union (EU) and Tunisia in terms of interculturality, mobility and youth are framed by several initiatives and agreements. In terms of interculturality, Tunisia and the EU have collaborated on projects to promote intercultural dialogue. For example, the EU-supported «Tfanen - Tunisie Créative» project aims to strengthen the cultural sector in Tunisia and promote intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity (EU Neighbours, n.d.). The EU has set up the Mobility Program for the Southern Neighborhood Region (MP), which aims to facilitate legal mobility between Tunisia and EU member states, notably by simplifying visa procedures and promoting the mobility of students, researchers and entrepreneurs (European Union External Action, n.d.). The EU has supported Tunisia in improving access to education and employment for young people, notably through the Programme d'appui à la qualité de l'éducation, de la formation et de l'emploi (PQEFÉ) (European Commission, n.d.). These initiatives demonstrate a desire to strengthen relations between the EU and Tunisia in key areas that contribute to the promotion of interculturality, mobility and support for young people.

Previously, we reported that North Macedonia was moving closer to European standards and recommendations. In March 2023, education and culture did not require any improvements on the part of North Macedonia to qualify for possible EU membership.

## Collaboration with civil society

We can therefore conclude that European and international policies are influencing local initiatives and policies in the four project countries through various incentive mechanisms. What about civil society?

In Tunisia, we can observe the reorientation of political interaction towards civil society. The Arab Spring was a political shock that changed perspectives at both national and international level. Indeed, prior to 2011, the state followed a strict policy of closure, supported by international partners (mainly the EU) in the name of stability and the fight against terrorism. This policy was guided by stereotypical perspectives on the Muslim world, and the Arab world in particular. Indeed, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the «Hollywood prototypical villain» became the Arab, a terrorist, a simple-minded Bedouin, shifting the focus from the USSR after the Cold War, according to Huntington's Clash of Civilizations theory (Walton, 2012). It wasn't until the Arab revolutions of 2011, starting in Tunisia, that the international scene changed (Walton, 2012). This meant that more political power was granted to civil society, «indicating[ing] a major policy shift towards more inclusive political dialogue, shifting the focus from relations with authority to relations with civil society» (Walton, 2012). Walton explains that in the wake of the Arab Spring, the EU has shifted its perceptions and relationships from government authorities to civil society, which has become an essential vector for promoting the values of democracy and citizenship via intercultural dialogue. Thus, the EU aspires to build a dialogue based on a common understanding of the cultures and perceptions of the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, aiming to change the «distorted and stereotyped perceptions» that people on both sides have of each other (Walton, 2012).

To this end, the EU has set up various initiatives to promote mobility and exchanges between young people, both within the EU and with certain non-member countries. These initiatives, such as ESC, European Youth Week, #EUYouthDialogue, #DiscoverEU, Erasmus+, Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (terminated), EURES, and #SHEU Leads, are accessible via the European Youth Portal, which features a section entitled «Going abroad» covering volunteering, internships, employment, studies, and school and youth exchanges (European Union, n.d.). Erasmus+ specifically supports non-formal learning exchanges for young people, aiming to empower and actively engage them as citizens, while acquiring skills relevant to their professional future (European Commission, n.d.). A 2018 European Commission document highlights three axes: mobilize, connect, and empower, emphasizing the importance of bringing together young people from diverse backgrounds to promote voluntary participation, mobility, solidarity and intercultural understanding, while equipping them with key skills such as teamwork, leadership, and project management (European Commission, 2018).

The European Union (EU) provided financial support for several projects aimed at strengthening regional cooperation within the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region between 2012 and 2015. These projects aimed to increase young people's ability to play an active role in the transformation of their countries, particularly in Libya,

Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Tunisia. These initiatives aimed to mobilize young people and youth organizations and networks to work together to promote social cohesion and reduce social and economic exclusion in their respective nations. In addition, they encouraged exchanges of experience between young people from different countries and actively involved them in societal dialogue (Lidou & Budry, 2015). Furthermore, within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Privileged Partnership, the EU and Tunisia have given a central place to culture in their cooperation. This approach has contributed to development, facilitated exchanges and knowledge sharing, while highlighting the richness and diversity of artistic creation and cultural heritage in Tunisia (Lidou & Budry, 2015). In addition, the Erasmus+ program was designed to intensify cooperation between Tunisian and European youth through informal education activities (Lidou & Budry, 2015; European Commission, 2017). Tunisia has also expressed interest in association with the European Commission's «Creative Europe» program, aimed at supporting initiatives strengthening the culture and media sectors, as well as promoting cross-border cooperation (European Commission, 2017).

## Interculturality to promote common values and interests

We can deduce from this that the current strategic framework for EU cultural policy demonstrates a strong commitment to close collaboration with member states, civil society organizations and international partners. This cooperation symbolizes the influence of EU policies on civil society, fostering exchanges and partnerships between the various players. In this way, EU cultural policy acts as a bridge between European institutions, member states and civil society, fostering constructive dialogue and mutual engagement to enrich the European cultural landscape (European Commission, n.d.).

The European Commission (2016) has drawn up an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations, the main aim of which is to promote cultural cooperation with partner countries. The strategy aims to support culture as a driver of sustainable development, encourage intercultural dialogue to foster peaceful relations between communities, and strengthen cooperation on cultural heritage. It emphasizes that intercultural dialogue has the power to defuse tensions and prevent crises from escalating, while promoting national reconciliation and encouraging new narratives to counter radicalization (European Commission, 2016).

The Erasmus+ program to date, as well as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, testify to the EU's commitment to promoting interculturalism, shared European values and cultural diversity within member states. Erasmus+ aims to encourage intercultural learning, enhance young people's skills and eliminate prejudice, while the 2008 initiative highlights the promotion of the EU's cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity as a central objective of European integration (European Union, 2006; European Commission, n.d.).

In conclusion, the EU's interests in promoting interculturality include securing lasting peace on its territory and beyond, strengthening its position as an influential global player, and contributing to social cohesion.

## IV. Interculturalism and national realities

Interculturalism is a policy paradigm distinguished from both civic integration and multiculturalism. Zapata-Barrero (2017) identifies three distinctive features of interculturalism: (1) it encourages contacts and interactions between individuals from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, (2) it focuses on the local level, and (3) it relies on mainstreaming strategies (Boucher & Maclure, 2018). The instrumental value of these interactions can be such that public authorities can encourage people to have more intercultural contact by creating contact zones and shared spaces for face-to-face interactions, such as community gardens, libraries, public facilities, festivals and neighborhood spaces (Boucher & Maclure, 2018). In this section, we will explore the national policies of Northern Macedonia, Tunisia, France and Belgium in order to identify the place interculturality occupies in them. It will be a question of identifying whether interculturality is present in national and/or local policies.

## A Vocabulary rooted in history

The relationship between different countries and the concept of interculturality is profoundly influenced by the specific historical, social and geopolitical contexts of each country. The way in which interculturality is perceived and implemented can vary considerably, and these variations can often be traced back to these countries' colonial and immigration histories.

### France's ambiguous position

In France, the word «interculturality» does not seem to feature much in French policies. We generally find it in the fields of education<sup>5</sup> and linguistics, notably with exchange programs and compulsory foreign language learning. This aspect focuses on the *comprehensive, interactive* dimension of the definition of interculturality. In France, the focus is on developing education for citizenship, tolerance and respect. The French national education system seeks to emphasize dialogue as a means of combating certain forms of violence (racism, anti-Semitism). This concept seems to be used more in cultural contexts than in other contexts, although it is important to emphasize the importance it has taken on in research (with the existence of labels such as «European Year of Intercultural Dialogue») and funds for international solidarity measures (via FONJEP, for example). The word «interculturality» was deemed politically inopportune in 1984, but remained present, as this was the year the Association de Recherches Interculturelles was founded. It disappeared from the educational sphere, becoming more present in research, and gradually returning to the public arena, especially (and still) in education.

The word *multiculturalism*, which is more concerned with the mere presence and multiplicity of coexisting cultures, is more often encountered in the media or the public sphere (France does not define itself as a multicultural society). Like the term interculturality, this one is ambiguous. Indeed, when linked to cultural diversity, it joins political debates, being not unrelated to the question of migration (and thus to that of national identity). It also resonates with the notion of equality, notably in policies on cultural diversity (with the republican ideal as the guarantor of equality, or through measures such as positive discrimination), but here again, there are inconsistencies or paradigms, since it is not possible to speak of cultures, or «origins» (Calvès, G), with policies taking little or no account of parameters other than socio-economic ones. Nevertheless, it would seem that interculturality is appearing in more local contexts, with the example of the Conseil Roubaisien de l'interculturalité et de la citoyenneté, or on a larger scale, in European policies.

In France, the idea of interculturality is foreign to the French conception of nationhood and education, as Marie-Claude Munoz explains (Demorgon, Lipiansky, 1999). The French nation was built by reducing regional languages and cultures, establishing a common language and culture in the service of a united nation. The school was one of the main instruments of this unification. The introduction of intercultural methods in the field of institutions (and particularly at the level of socialization) signifies a profound change in the way of thinking about the latter (Rafoni, 2003). It should be noted that relations between actors from different cultures have always existed (e.g., regional communities in France). However, the author stresses that the end of colonialism, the uncertainties of integrating minority cultural groups, and ultimately the crisis of civilization in the West, are catalysts for this awareness and evolution towards a different vision of relations between cultures. Interculturality then becomes a necessary training and practice (Rafoni, 2003). In French society, intercultural issues are mainly dealt with polemically, due to the specific stakes involved. Interculturality in France is inextricably linked with the political management of cultural diversity, immigration and the colonial past (Boulay, 2008). As we have seen, however, France is part of a more global context, with a determination to open up to diversity. Thanks to Europe, its policies and its exchange programs (such as Erasmus+), links between countries have enabled a cultural mix and exchanges with its inhabitants. This principle can also be found in the numerous twinning arrangements between cities (from the end of the Second World War onwards), which aim to strengthen interactions and exchanges of knowledge on a more local scale.

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5. The concept of interculturality emerged in France in the 1970s, a post-war period that also saw the arrival of foreign workers. The term first appeared in France in national education circulars (1973 and 1978), following its appearance at the Council of Europe. These structural changes led to the reshaping of certain sectors, including labor and education, which is why culture and diversity were key issues at the time. Numerous measures were taken, right up to the 80s and 90s, when the very notion of interculturality began to have a more negative impact in the sphere of education.



The way interculturality is approached in France reveals how colonial history and immigration can influence the perception and implementation of interculturality in a given country. These historical and social elements help shape public policies, educational and social practices, and public discourse around interculturality. Comparison with other countries with different histories and contexts can reveal significant differences in the way interculturality is understood and practiced. For example, countries like Belgium or Tunisia, with their own histories of colonialism, immigration and cultural diversity, may have different approaches to interculturality in response to their specific national contexts.

### ***Tunisianity at the expense of recognizing diversity***

In Tunisia, interculturality is a concept that has evolved, particularly in the post-revolutionary context where the country has moved towards democratization. However, the transition to a more intercultural society has encountered challenges, particularly in state institutions, which find it difficult to accept cultural identities different from those they have constructed. Despite an education that aims to promote interculturality, notably through the teaching of foreign languages such as French and English, the effective implementation of interculturality in the national strategy remains limited (Abid, 2021). Tunisia, with its rich cultural and historical heritage, has the potential to promote interculturality as a means of enriching social dialogue and contributing to a more inclusive global citizenship. However, the effective implementation of interculturality requires a broader recognition and valorization of the diverse cultures and identities present in the country.

This is because, since its independence in 1956, Tunisia has sought to build a «Tunisianity» designed to unify Tunisians, irrespective of their region of origin or territorial specificities. The policy adopted is aimed at guaranteeing the unity of the nation and reinforcing the sense of belonging to a common culture, a national culture. Bourguiba, President of the Tunisian Republic from 1957 to 1987, defended the idea of building national unity through a common memory and culture in which Tunisians could recognize themselves, while maintaining an openness to the cultural mixing that the country has experienced over time. However, it is the Arab-Muslim heritage that is privileged in the construction of Tunisian identity, since the 1959 constitution establishes Arabic as the official language and Islam as the country's religion (Mezrioui, 2021).

The question of cultural diversity in Tunisia is closely linked to legal texts: their institutional recognition depends largely on the Arab-Muslim roots that have shaped the country's identity. From this perspective, population groups in which Arab-Muslim culture is not deeply rooted struggle to gain full recognition. With little media coverage, or even exclusion from debate in the public arena, these groups are marginalized and discriminated against (Mezrioui, 2021). Despite the ongoing democratization process, reflexes denying otherness persist: the new constitution does not defend the cultural, linguistic and historical rights of the Amazigh, and Tunisian schools ignore them in their history books (Mezrioui, 2021). Circulars are a telling example: they often claim to guarantee an (imaginary) harmony of the dominant or majority culture. This is notably the case with circulars that impose standards for the choice of children's first names, limiting the choice to a narrow conception of Arab-Muslim culture, and thereby obscuring the various other components of Tunisian identity: Amazigh, Jewish, Christian, Mediterranean, African... This approach undermines the diversity and, above all, the dignity of people belonging to or claiming to belong to other cultures. It is mentioned that Arab-Muslim civilization throughout the world reflects a certain métissage and can only cultivate cultural openness (Ferchichi, 2018).

Tunisia has clearly demonstrated its commitment to interculturality through various treaties and summits with its Maghreb and EU counterparts. This was initiated by the Barcelona Process signed by Tunisia in 1998, aimed at strengthening Tunisia's political, economic and cultural relations with the EU and its neighbors, Algeria and Morocco. This partnership focuses on «peace-building, the establishment of a long-term free-trade zone and intercultural dialogue» (Durrieu, n. d.). 2008 saw the organization of an international meeting in Tunis on «Intercultural dialogue and media stereotypes concerning Euro-Mediterranean relations», illustrating Tunisia's commitment to inter-religious dialogue. The event was marked by the presence of the Tunisian Mufti and the Algerian President of the High Islamic Council, as well as the creation of the Ben-Ali Chair for Dialogue between Civilizations (Durrieu, n. d.). However, it is easy to see that these projects, whether developed 'nationally' or internationally (with the EU, or other Arab/African countries), have failed to integrate interculturality into Tunisia's national strategy, whether through the Ministry



of Culture or the Ministry of Education. These approaches remain mainly signed treaties and abstract projects, or at best, small initiatives, mostly developed by youth or civil society, as mentioned earlier in the section on the role of civil society and its commitment to promoting interculturality.

### **Interculturality as a peace-building tool in the Republic of Northern Macedonia**

The Balkan Peninsula, which brings together diverse cultures and religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, has long been considered one of the world's most conflict-ridden regions, despite the essential similarities between these religions, all of which advocate peace as an ideal. However, political, social and economic instability has made communication and cooperation impossible in this region since the end of the 20th century (Pavleski, n.d.).

On the one hand, regional cooperation and communication have mainly been initiated by the international community over the last two decades. EU membership has had a transformative impact on the region, stimulating regional recovery and stabilization, while redefining existing administrative and political divisions. Intercultural dialogue has become a logical consequence of thinking about European integration, with the EU seen as a major player in promoting this dialogue, with a particular emphasis on human rights in building an inclusive Balkan region.

On the other hand, the focus of regional cooperation has been on building mutual trust and rebuilding relations in a previously unstable region. Mutual trust, a major objective of intercultural communication, is seen as an instrument for reducing the potential for the resurgence of violence and creating the conditions for development and prosperity. The link between communication and sustainable peace in the Balkans can be analyzed through two components: the number of cooperation initiatives and participating states, and the extent to which the objectives of these initiatives have been achieved. These elements illustrate the Balkan countries' readiness for communication and cooperation, and their commitment to these objectives. Almost all the regional cooperation initiatives have been signed and accepted by all the Balkan countries, testifying to a clear intention and common will to resolve outstanding issues peacefully and ensure a peaceful, stable and prosperous region.

In North Macedonia, the concept of «A society for all» with advanced interculturality is put forward, involving the recognition of all differences, guaranteeing equality, social justice, fairness, equal opportunities for women and men, and promoting the involvement and participation of citizens in decision-making (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2019). This strategic orientation responds to the need to overcome existing societal divisions on various bases, including ethnicity, often associated with religious division. Several international organizations, including the European Commission, the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention on National Minorities, as well as other monitoring mechanisms of the Council of Europe and the United Nations, have stressed the need to build an integrated society based on the rule of law, the protection of human rights, respect for diversity, and to reject exclusivist ethno-nationalist policies (Council of Europe, n.d.).

The design and implementation of this strategy are aligned with the government's program and strategic priorities for the year 2020. The main objective is to improve intercultural communication in the Republic of North Macedonia between diverse cultures and communities, by implementing the recommendations of international organizations such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the European Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This national strategy, drawn up for the first time in the Republic of North Macedonia, is of particular importance given the existing societal divisions on various grounds. Its aim is to initiate activities and strengthen communication and cooperation between communities, with a view to creating an inclusive society where everyone feels part of a «single society». The idea is to move from a divided society to one that is fair, equitable and more egalitarian. The implementation of this strategy is planned over three years, with a reassessment at the end of this period to decide on the next steps. It is broken down into seven strategic areas comprising a situation analysis, priorities and objectives, and an action section, each of which sets out specific priorities and objectives aimed at realizing the vision of a more integrated society and changing the current social reality (Council of Europe, 2018).

## **Interculturalism: the result of Belgium's complex evolution**

Belgium is divided into linguistic communities (French, Flemish, German - Brussels, the capital, is a bilingual region) and regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital). The notion of interculturality is used in all three of Belgium's regions. Over the decades, these regions have put in place policies to promote integration, social cohesion and interculturality. Educational, cultural and social initiatives have been developed to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding between communities. Each regional entity has progressively developed its own cultural and educational policies, taking into account its cultural and linguistic diversity. This approach to «living together» is based on the idea that Belgium draws its wealth from its multicultural character. The model of shared citizenship aims to guarantee equal rights and duties for all, by promoting mutual respect and tolerance of cultural diversity. However, this ambition is demanding and also requires respect for the authority of the State and the fundamental values of democracy, as set out in the final report of the Intercultural Dialogue Commission in 2004.

Interculturality in Belgium is the result of a complex historical evolution linked to the country's cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as to social, political and economic factors. Belgium's history is marked by the colonization of Central Africa, mainly the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). This colonization had a significant impact on Belgium's multicultural make-up, as it led to the arrival of many people from the colonies. After the Second World War, Belgium experienced a major wave of immigration, largely due to the labor needed to rebuild the country. Migrant workers came mainly from Morocco, Turkey, Italy, Spain and other countries. In 1984, Belgium reformed its nationality law to grant Belgian nationality to children born in Belgium to foreign parents. This had an impact on the integration of immigrant families and the recognition of cultural diversity in the country.

In the Walloon Region, interculturality is a key component of citizenship education and social integration. Walloon society defines itself as multicultural, although Walloon cultural identity is largely dominant (Destatte, 1997). A clear distinction is made between political identity, based on neutrality towards cultures, cults and respect for difference, and pluralist cultural identity, based on the existence of particular communities. The decree of March 8, 2018 on the promotion of Citizenship and Interculturality defines citizenship as the active exercise of human rights within the framework of a democracy founded on the values of freedom, equality and solidarity. Interculturality, for its part, is described as a dynamic and interactive process between groups or individuals of different and/or multiple cultures, with the aim of mutual understanding and the construction of a common world (Decree on the Promotion of Citizenship and Interculturality, 2018). Each year, a call for projects is launched to promote citizenship and interculturality, focusing on three areas of action: educating young people about citizenship in a multicultural context, intercultural dialogue and the fight against racism, and the rights of migrants, particularly women's rights (Decree on the Promotion of Citizenship and Interculturality, 2018).

In Flanders, the trend is towards cultural multiculturalism. Since the early 1990s, integration in education has been based on four elements: language proficiency, intercultural education, education in the languages and cultures of origin (OETC), and welcoming.

At the heart of this intercultural issue is the Intercultural Center for Immigrants, founded in 1993. It is a specialized organization whose aim is to provide guidance and assistance to immigrant socio-cultural associations. The Decree of April 19, 1995 stimulates the development of associations and federations. A large number of associations promote immigrant cultures and facilitate their transmission.

In Brussels, the Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle (CBAI), set up in 1981, provides training, information, cultural dissemination and support for associations, as part of the Brussels Region's policy of welcoming and integrating immigrants. Intercultural mediators» are also present in the health sector. Since then, in many other fields. The 1996 decree (amended in 2009) on the integration of foreigners and people of foreign origin proposes the construction of an intercultural society as a perspective for all actions in favor of integration. This decree also proposes the articulation of these actions with social cohesion plans (Dispositif de Concertation et d'Appui aux Centres Régionaux d'Intégration, n.d.). The specific approach makes it possible to identify the particular needs of the different groups concerned, so as to implement targeted positive actions. This approach makes it possible to tackle head-on the multiple forms of discrimination that certain categories of people may suffer, such as migrant women who have not attended school, or young adults who have attended school but whose qualifications are not recognized in Belgium. However, this specific approach was not enough. It needed to be complemented by a «mainstreaming» approach to social cohesion, integration and interculturality in all Wallonia's policies and actions (Dispositif de Concertation

et d'Appui aux Centres Régionaux d'Intégration, n.d.). The concept of interculturality does not always seem to be clear. Indeed, while the link between social cohesion and integration seems obvious, the link with interculturality raised more questions than answers. For example, during the debates, it was mentioned several times that some IRC workers didn't always know how to advise and support associations or public services on this subject. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that there are still no indicators for measuring a society's interculturality (Dispositif de Concertation et d'Appui aux Centres Régionaux d'Intégration, n.d.). Even today, the eight Regional Integration Centers (CRI) play a crucial role in Wallonia, coordinating and implementing integration policies at regional level. Each of Belgium's three regions has its own CRI, working closely with local authorities, civic organizations and other partners to support the social, economic and cultural integration of migrants and people of foreign origin. These centers implement a wide range of initiatives, such as language support, social orientation, employment assistance, intercultural education and cultural diversity awareness.

In order to interpret interculturality in Belgium as closely as possible to the experience of the associative sector, we consulted Massimo Bortolini of the CBAI about the profession of cultural mediator and the evolution of social policies in Belgium since the 1990s. Here's a summary of what he wrote: in the 1990s, Belgium was marked by several immigration-related events, such as the revolts in Forest, the electoral victory of the Vlaams Blok and the creation of the Royal Commissariat for Immigrant Policy. These events led to significant media coverage of the immigration issue and increased focus on social and security policies. Faced with the growing discredit of public authority and a growing sense of insecurity, the Belgian federal government sought to develop social policies focused primarily on prevention and security. This led to the creation of prevention officer posts in 1992, whose role is to work with socially fragile groups and neighborhoods with a high level of delinquency.

A series of measures were put in place, such as security and prevention contracts, which focused on specific areas such as social mediation, school problems, work with young people, security in social housing, etc. These policies are also marked by the emergence of new players such as peacekeepers and social mediators, tasked with strengthening dialogue between the police and the population and bringing the municipality closer to its residents. The intercultural dimension is becoming increasingly important in these policies, while prevention professions such as social and intercultural mediators are being created to work in areas with immigrant or foreign populations. However, the initial approach seems to identify the problem as mainly cultural before considering it as social. Finally, Bortolini points out that these policies have changed little in their objectives since the 1990s, but have instead seen adjustments in the levels of intervention and skills of the actors involved, as well as in the specific programs set up. In addition, after the 2015-2016 attacks in Paris and Brussels, it is noted that some social workers were asked to report individuals considered «radicalized».

Currently, debates on identity, cultural diversity, secularism, and the coexistence of linguistic and cultural communities are still topical in Belgium. Intercultural issues continue to be at the heart of public and political debate. In short, interculturality in Belgium emerged in response to the country's cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as to historical events such as colonization and immigration. It reflects ongoing efforts to promote the harmonious coexistence of different communities and to foster intercultural dialogue in a country marked by its diversity. The «Commission on Intercultural Dialogue», set up by Minister Marie Arena in February 2004 and which published its final report in May 2005, has shown sensitivity to this intercultural perspective, opening up interesting avenues in terms of valuing memories, languages (in education), and media presence. However, as Nathalie Caprioli writes in the editorial of the above-mentioned issue of *Agenda Interculturel*, this Final Report has been «relegated to oblivion since May 2005». It's also important to remember that these issues fall within the competence of the Communities and Regions: the Flemish Region recognizes 14 associations of various origins and affiliations, and has set up a *Minderhedenforum* (Minorities Forum) as a representative interlocutor; nothing of the kind exists in Brussels, Wallonia or the French Community. Today, Belgium faces a new challenge: to realize a fourth form of pluralism, cultural pluralism, which is specified as follows: The aim is to transform cultural diversity resulting from migratory flows into active plurality' (Faux, 2008).

## Interculturality, cultural policies and educational policies

In the course of our research, a recurring link has emerged between interculturality and education. We'll take a few lines to explore this.

Interculturality in the field of education in Belgium is of crucial importance, focusing on the management of cultural and linguistic diversity within schools and educational establishments. Here's an overview of the key points concerning interculturality in education in Belgium:

- Bilingual education in Brussels: As a bilingual region, Brussels offers education in both French and Dutch. Brussels schools are often confronted with students from families speaking different languages, creating a multicultural environment. To help students adapt to teaching in either language, numerous programs are in place.

- Integration of migrant pupils: Belgium is home to a large number of migrant pupils, each with different mother tongues. Schools have developed welcome and integration programs to help these students acclimatize to the Belgian education system and master the language of instruction, whether French, Dutch or German, depending on the region.

- Intercultural education: Some regions of Belgium offer specific intercultural education programs. These programs aim to raise awareness of cultural diversity, encourage intercultural dialogue and combat discrimination and racism.

- Enseignement des langues et cultures d'origine (ELCO): Students, especially those from migrant families, are sometimes offered ELCO courses to maintain their link with their native language and culture.

- Local initiatives: Schools and local communities frequently set up projects and activities to foster intercultural understanding. These can include cultural events, international student exchanges and various other initiatives.

- Diversity awareness: Teachers and school staff often receive training on how to manage cultural diversity in the classroom and promote an inclusive atmosphere.

Interculturality in Belgian education is constantly evolving in response to the growing diversity of the school population. Education authorities and schools are constantly looking for ways to adapt their practices to better meet the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds, while promoting an inclusive school environment that respects diversity.

In France, interculturality occupies an ambivalent place in education. From the 1970s onwards, the issue of multiculturalism gained prominence, marked by the accessibility of schools to the children of migrant workers in 1977, demonstrating the political interest in inclusion and diversity. This period also saw the introduction of «intercultural activities» at elementary school in 1978, demonstrating a commitment to the integration of immigrant children. However, this intercultural dimension was later withdrawn from administrative discourse due to concerns linked to the republican principle of equality. Educational, urban and cultural policies play a predominant role in managing diversity. However, these policies remain generally insensitive to the concepts of interculturality and cultural difference, being firmly anchored in the republican model of integration (Boulay, 2008). Within this landscape, education occupies a central place as a symbolic arena where different norms confront each other in response to growing cultural heterogeneity. Education for pluralism is seen as a bulwark against violence and a vector for cultural and civic enrichment in contemporary societies. However, reality shows that, by virtue of republican egalitarianism, teachers do not take sufficient account of the cultural specificities of their pupils, for example, by treating absences during non-Christian religious holidays as «family reasons» or neglecting the provision of alternative meals in the canteen (Boulay, 2008). This reveals the challenge of integrating interculturality into French educational and societal frameworks while maintaining traditional republican principles. The vision of education in France, as set out in the moral and civic education program for school and college (cycles 2, 3 and 4) published by the French Ministry of Education in 2018, emphasizes «respect for others». The ethics taught in schools is described as a civic morality closely linked to the principles and values of republican and democratic citizenship. It is based on an awareness of the dignity and integrity of each individual, fostering respect for their freedom and equal dignity, while promoting fraternal relations. This ethic also includes respect for individuals' philosophical and religious convictions, consistent with secularism (Ministry of National Education, 2018). However, it is important to note that this document does not explicitly mention interculturality or cultural diversity within French society. Thus, after a surge in the 70s/80s, policies linked to «cultural» interculturality seem to have slowed down and focused more on linguistic aspects, such as language exchanges during schooling. France's position on interculturality in schools remains complex and open to different interpretations. While some point to the lack of sensitivity of public policies in this respect (Boulay Benjamin, 2008), the government emphasizes the importance of national education and the possession of a culture to



foster understanding of what is universal in all cultures. Interculturality thus appears as an element of these complex and controversial debates, difficult to categorize in a consensual manner. It is this same desire for a strong national identity that leads to a link between interculturality and the «Other» (Rautenberg M.). Despite the efforts made, the State seems to adopt a complex and contradictory attitude that makes it impossible to decide on its position.

In the Republic of Northern Macedonia, interculturality, as defined by the Office for the Development of Education, is characterized by interaction between two or more cultural groups, regardless of their size or level of mutual influence. This approach differs from some critics of multiculturalism, who argue that it fosters cultural segregation by failing to promote interaction between different cultures and the successful integration of their members into a multicultural society. Interculturality, on the contrary, emphasizes dynamic cultural exchange, dialogue and interaction between cultures (Bureau for Development of Education, n. d.). In the educational context of the Republic of North Macedonia, interculturality occupies a prominent place. Intercultural education is seen as a means of supporting the richness of diversity in all aspects of human life. It aims to promote equal opportunities, human rights, non-discrimination, empathy, acceptance and respect, addressing all children and students, whatever their age. The natural integration of interculturality into the daily educational process is encouraged, regardless of the ethnic and linguistic structure of pupils and teachers within a school (S. Bilal, B Krsteska-Papic & OEmin, n. d.). In January 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science in the Republic of North Macedonia adopted new intercultural education standards for secondary education, highlighting the country's multicultural and multi-ethnic dimension. These standards emphasize the importance of interculturality in education, and aim to develop in students attitudes, skills and knowledge that foster the acquisition of intercultural competence (Ministry of Education and Science in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). Various strategies are used to promote interculturality in primary education. These include the introduction of multicultural content into the curricula of all subjects, the introduction of optional subjects dedicated to learning about the cultural/ethnic characteristics of all residents, and the organization of activities aimed at fostering inter-ethnic integration. These activities, whether integrated into the curriculum or extracurricular, play a crucial role in encouraging interaction between students who would not otherwise have the opportunity to collaborate during their formal education (Ministry of Education and Science in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021). The emphasis on interculturality in education in the Republic of North Macedonia stems from the recognition of the country's multicultural and multi-ethnic character, and the need to foster communication and interaction between different ethnic communities. This approach is designed to prepare future generations to live in a multicultural society and to participate successfully in an increasingly globalized environment. It is based on the principles of tolerance, non-discrimination, respect, acceptance and other universal, human values. In this way, intercultural education helps to improve coexistence in this multi-ethnic and multicultural reality, focusing on the development of intercultural skills essential for contemporary life. Furthermore, this approach is in line with the construction and promotion of a diverse European identity, in line with the European Union's recommendations for a «European educational area» (Ministry of Education and Science in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022).

In the Tunisian education system, interculturality is supposed to be taught through foreign language education (mainly French and English), as language learning and global citizenship are intrinsically linked (Abid, 2021). Indeed, teaching intercultural citizenship education in schools fosters a sense of global citizenship in students, as they learn more about the countries of the world, their cultures, global problems, their causes and solutions. In addition, students will develop a set of skills not only in critical thinking, but also in intercultural communication (Abid, 2021). However, although the foreign language curriculum advances a narrative that emphasizes the interplay between national and universal values of freedom, human rights, democracy and social justice, it neglects the inclusion of intercultural citizenship. Indeed, the program focuses mainly on teaching language vocabulary and certain cultural references without actually teaching culture through activities or attempting to adapt global issues such as social justice and climate change to the Tunisian context for Tunisian students (Abid, 2021).



## V. Young people's intercultural experience

Having set the scene for European and national policies, let's turn now to the intercultural experience of young people, and the support offered by the voluntary sector to help them achieve this intercultural experience.

### Intercultural shock and intercultural experience

The notion of culture shock has been, and still is, central to the international and national political projects mentioned above. Indeed, the aim of intercultural management is to reduce this cultural shock as much as possible, so that different cultural groups can live together. Some policies encourage the promotion of universal values or the use of an all-embracing cultural reference. What emerges is the mold in which policies are made, the flaw of which is that they do not really allow for an intercultural society, notably by «ignoring» the different cultural components that make it up.

It is interesting to note that few of the young people who responded to the questionnaire and/or were interviewed mentioned the notion of culture shock when sharing their definition of interculturality. Indeed, interculturality is often described as the encounter or interaction between different cultures. According to them, it can take the form of exchanges between individuals from different countries or continents, as well as within the same country. Culture, in this context, is shaped by many factors, such as place of birth, parental upbringing, place of growth, and financial or social situation. Other definitions emphasize cohabitation with people of different cultures, assimilation of diverse cultures, openness to the culture of others, and the relationship or exchange between people of different cultures. An important aspect of interculturality emphasized is the understanding, respect and appreciation of diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering dialogue and collaboration between individuals from different cultures. An interesting metaphorical illustration: interculturality is presented as a rainbow, where the different colors represent cultural diversity, and appreciation of this diversity makes the rainbow more colorful and beautiful.

The notion of tension and conflict emerges, however, when it comes to intercultural experience.

The results of the survey revealed that, of all the young people questioned<sup>6</sup>, 83% say they have had an intercultural experience (91% for Belgium, 85% for France, 75% for Northern Macedonia and 78% for Tunisia), while 17% say they have not yet had such an experience. It emerges from the interviews that an intercultural experience is often perceived as an exchange between two or more people from different cultural backgrounds, where cultural differences clearly manifest themselves and influence the exchange. This can happen when traveling, exchanging ideas on social networks, or even meeting someone who is not a native of one's own region. It involves interaction and engagement between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, offering opportunities to learn, share and exchange ideas, values, customs and traditions. Key elements of an intercultural experience include cultural diversity, open-mindedness, effective communication, empathy, conflict resolution and increased cultural awareness. Concrete examples include study abroad programs, cultural festivals, international conferences, and multicultural work environments. Other examples mentioned include going abroad, participating in associations, and meeting people native to other countries. Difficulties can arise in intercultural communication, for example, misunderstandings caused by differences in cultural greetings, illustrating the importance of active listening and confirmation to avoid communication gaps and hasty judgments. Finally, an intercultural experience can consist of exchanges of information on cultural aspects such as food between people from different cultures, regions or places.

On this subject, Hela Nafti, a Tunisian researcher specializing in linguistics, sociolinguistics and education, explains that it's easy to take a positive view of interculturality: just look at the benefits it can bring to young people, to people who want to share their values and principles, to develop life skills that enable them to become open-minded, to foster their communication skills and to become citizens of the world. She adds that this vision is somewhat utopian, however, given the various obstacles and challenges encountered in a world where barriers, borders, visas and wars have

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6. The survey was carried out to obtain representative data from four countries: Tunisia, France, Northern Macedonia and Belgium. 439 young people aged between 15 and 30 responded to the questionnaire, with the following proportions: 23% from Tunisia, 27% from France, 24% from Northern Macedonia and 26% from Belgium. 80% were women and 20% men.

become the norm. This makes it difficult to develop intercultural ideas and encourage young people to experience interculturality as a human right.

It's interesting to note this nuance from one definition to the next, shifting from an ideal to a focus on personal experiences (whether positive or negative) and practices, depending on the context and the people being interviewed. Once again, the choice of words and the way in which the question is posed appear to be essential in revealing experience.

Let's take a closer look at the elements that these definitions carry within them. The question of mobility, digital technology and intercultural communication.

## Mobility

The Connexion-s survey reveals that, while 20% of young people say they have experienced interculturality online, the majority of young people who have had an intercultural experience have done so through an immersive experience (travel to a foreign country or with their family in a foreign country if they have an immigrant background, exchanges, projects abroad...). «Indeed, 34% say they have experienced interculturality through travel, and 57% through an exchange (with an organization, a university or as part of a school project). This reveals a strong correlation with the notion of displacement, and that it's more common to experience things in this way».

They emphasize the nuance of an intercultural experience that ranges from intercultural encounter to cultural immersion. The intercultural experience seems more intense when the customs one discovers seem different from one's own culture. Chloe (Belgium) describes her stay in Tunisia as part of an Erasmus + RECIT ODD exchange involving three of the 4 Connexion-s project partners as her first intercultural experience. Many people emphasize that going directly abroad immerses us much more in the local culture and undoubtedly marks the experience of interculturality even more» (Lisa, 20, Belgium).

The level of intensity and therefore satisfaction with this intercultural experience also depends on whether you're a non-native or a native. Maria (Northern Macedonia) explains that when you're a native facing a person of another origin, the latter doesn't express his or her opinions for fear of being looked down upon, of not fitting in. Experience in the other direction, when she (Maria) is a foreigner in another country, would teach her more about the other's culture. The Erasmus program she took part in would have offered her this: «I had a lot of experiences, I met a lot of people from different cultures, I was part of an Erasmus. There were people from Kenya, Turkey, Romania, Slovenia and so on. We had a great time, we talked about our cultural exchanges, it was really fun, we met a lot of new people. And often, when I walk around, I see a lot of people from different countries.»

These mobility experiences would be transformative: «This experience transformed me, because I became actively involved in various aspects of campus life. I joined multicultural clubs where I met students from diverse backgrounds, participated in volunteer initiatives that put me in touch with local communities, and attended events that celebrated different cultures. These interactions introduced me to the traditions, customs and viewpoints of people from all over the world, giving me a deep sense of understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity.» (Yesmine, Tunisia). And even when cultures seem close, Chloe (Belgium) says of her academic Erasmus exchange in France, «It was my second experience in France, but there are differences in mentality about many things, so it's not always easy to understand each other, even though it's a neighbouring country».

Regarding the need for mobility to live the intercultural experience, Pretvi (France) believes «... that it's essential to go and be exposed to different cities, internationally or in any place, because talking to one person doesn't allow you to know the culture, it doesn't represent the whole culture of the place they come from. They may react differently, but the whole system, the whole society, will react differently if you go to the country. For me, it's essential that people travel to discover the culture, the mindset of the people, everything they eat and what they think about everything that's going on in the world. So you have to be in that atmosphere to absorb and gain knowledge and understanding of the society of the people who live in that city. So you can't just watch a video or talk to someone, because that person isn't a complete representation of society; you have to be in that reality, to identify the «real» things».

The question of international mobility and thus immersion in a foreign context is also presented as inherent and necessary to the fact of living an intercultural experience, but «... on condition that you take risks by moving away from tourism - the enemy of interculturality - and diving into people's everyday reality to better meet the other, trust then becomes essential». By the same token, Marie, a French youth worker, explains that «What's vital is to overcome our introversion, to overcome our fear of the unknown».

Other intercultural experiences can also be had locally (10%). Lisa (Belgium) explains that being part of the ESN (Erasmus Student Network) enables her to meet many people from different backgrounds. Yesmine (Tunisia) and a number of other young people point out that «Intercultural interaction and learning can take place at a local level, within one's own community or even within the confines of a single city within :

- Diverse local communities: Many cities and regions of the world are culturally diverse, with inhabitants from a variety of ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Coming into contact with people from different cultures in your local community can provide you with valuable intercultural experiences.

- Cultural events and festivals: Local cultural events, festivals and celebrations (including religious ones) often feature the traditions, food, music and art of different cultures. Participating in these events can offer immersive intercultural experiences.

- During language exchanges: Learning and practicing different languages, even within your local community, can facilitate intercultural understanding by immersing you in the linguistic and cultural nuances of a specific group of people.

- With international and immigrant students: Many educational institutions attract students from different countries, and many cities are home to immigrant populations. Rubbing shoulders with foreign students or immigrants in your area can lead to meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

- Through volunteer work: Engaging in volunteer activities serving diverse populations can provide an opportunity to work closely with people from different cultural backgrounds, thus fostering intercultural experiences.

- In the school context, where classmates from other cultures are brought into contact, and where culture has pride of place, with each student contributing and communicating elements of his or her own culture.

- In the context of European projects such as the Erasmus+ program, Yesmine (Tunisia) explains «... I took part in two important multicultural exchanges that further enriched my intercultural experiences. The first exchange took place in Tunis, my hometown, where young people from different countries came together. By taking part in discussions, collaborative projects and cultural activities, I discovered the subtleties of various cultures while sharing aspects of my own heritage. This exchange highlighted the importance of dialogue and mutual respect in bridging cultural gaps. The second exchange took place in Belgium, where young people from different nations came together for a similar program. This experience gave me a global perspective, enabling me to understand cultural differences in a broader context. Through collaborative workshops and team-building exercises, I developed lasting friendships and a deep sense of unity with participants from all over the world. These cross-cultural experiences, both in Canada and as part of multicultural exchanges, broadened my horizons, challenged my perspectives and instilled in me a deep respect for the richness of cultural diversity. These encounters not only shaped my worldview, but also inspired me to promote intercultural understanding and harmony in my personal and professional life.»

Today, it seems unlikely that anyone has not had, or will not be able to have, an intercultural experience, either locally or as a result of mobility. There is a correlation between living abroad and having had an intercultural experience: analysis of the questionnaire showed that 82% of young people who had lived abroad said they had had an intercultural experience. This is particularly true of Yesmine, who followed an academic course in Canada.

However, the remaining 18% of young people who had lived abroad declared that they had had no intercultural experience. The analysis of the questionnaire highlighted the fact that «even when young people are exposed to a new cultural environment, some may not have had the opportunity or the means to actively engage in intercultural exchange». Several hypotheses have been put forward regarding this statement: concentration on specific objectives (studies, work...), thus limiting opportunities for intercultural engagement. Others may find themselves in more isolated or culturally undiverse contexts, limiting the chances of meaningful intercultural experiences. Language barriers could also be an obstacle, even living in a foreign country, if the local language is a barrier and young people don't have the opportunity to interact with locals and other cultures because of language, this could limit their ability to have meaningful intercultural experiences» (Connexion-s, Questionnaire Analysis, p.27).

So it's not uncommon for some people to report that, despite a mobility experience, they had no intercultural experience at all. Possible explanations include the degree of interaction and intimacy, the definition of interculturality, the quality and content of the exchanges the person feels he or she needs to experience in order to be intercultural, the environment in which the person lived during his or her stay, or the obstacles he or she faced (language barriers in particular, which would not allow full experimentation and could even lead to a misunderstanding equated with a bad experience). This can also be explained by the degree of importance of mobility as a condition for intercultural experience for these interviewees.

## Digital technology and interculturality

To the question of whether it's easy to live an intercultural experience these days, Hela Nafti replied: «We can say that it's certainly easier today to live interculturality with the advent of new technologies that offer means of exchange and communication through social networks, videos and other communication tools. But it can also be difficult to live interculturality because of all the anti-immigration laws, visas imposed on many countries, ethnocentrism, stereotypes...».

Having established that mobility is not a necessary condition for intercultural experience, and that even when it does take place, mobility does not guarantee intercultural experience, let's turn our attention to the role that digital can play in interculturality.

Cellan (2017) citing Fuchs explains although online communities already existed before the advent of social media, people's ability to interact and network with almost anyone, anywhere, quickly and limitlessly, could now be easily achieved through social media (Fuchs, 2014). Digital technology could thus help to overcome the most important obstacles to accessing interculturality that the young people interviewed listed (financial difficulties, political and security situations, mobility and visa requirements).

However, it is legitimate to question the quality of interaction and the feeling of actually living an intercultural experience. «Digital technology enables instant global connectivity, facilitating exchanges and interactions between people from different cultures, regardless of their geographical location. It also offers digital platforms and applications that enable the creation of interactive and dynamic learning environments. However, unequal access to technology can exclude some young people from these online intercultural experiences, and although digital technology facilitates communication, it can sometimes lack the warmth and authenticity of face-to-face interaction, which can limit the depth of intercultural understanding.» (Youth worker, Tunisia). Future Connexion-s productions will address the advantages, disadvantages and inequalities of digital technology.

Narciso Cellan studies how social media use and online sociability influence (young people's) ethnocentric tendencies. He argues that, in line with identity theories, human and community relations, even when they take place within an online network and through intercultural relations via social networks, influence who we become.

Also, this study revealed that if social networks did not promote inclusivity and intercultural exchange, ethnocentric attitudes could intensify. (Cellan, 2017). Interestingly, the values and communication modalities that young people highlighted in their definition of interculturality and intercultural experience (cohabitation with people from other cultures, openness to the culture of others, relationship and exchange, understanding, mutual respect in an egalitarian relationship, appreciation of diverse cultural backgrounds, dialogue and collaboration) are essential to the quality of intercultural interaction whether it takes place in a physically mobile setting or in a digital environment.

«As a communications technology, the Internet is both a social tool and a space. The formation of Internet-based communities and online interactions are symptomatic of a society that is evolving not only in the way it uses technology, but also in the way it allows itself to be influenced by it. The Internet confers a new dimension on self-identity and sociality. « (Cellan, N. 2017). As Cellan (2017) points out, communications via the internet have paved the way for young people to become active members of a global community. Although online communities already existed before the advent of social media, people's ability to interact and network with almost anyone, anywhere, quickly and limitlessly, can now be easily achieved thanks to social media.

However, digital technology cannot dispel all obstacles, such as fear and apprehension of others, language barriers, rejection of others and withdrawal into oneself. This is where the importance of learning intercultural communication comes into play.

## Intercultural communication and intercultural competence

«It's important to be aware of cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings. We need to learn about the culture, the degree of formality. We must also learn to listen actively and attentively to others, to learn about their habits, traditions and etiquette» (Focus group of the Connexion-s project).

Previously, we exposed the fact that if digital interactions did not promote inclusivity and intercultural exchange, ethnocentric attitudes were reinforced. Cellan (2017) defines ethnocentrism as an attitude of antipathy towards outside groups. It is said to manifest itself as «a lack of acceptance of cultural diversity, a general intolerance of outgroups and a relative preference for one's own group over most outgroups (Berry and Kalin 1995)». Although it has positive aspects (patriotism and heroic deeds), on the other hand it can lead to narrow-mindedness and sectarianism that would prevent anyone from engaging and open intercultural communication (Don et al. 1995). Thus, Cellan (2017) points out that «any effort to at least interact with other cultures, and especially to understand and appreciate the positive and inclusive values that the 'strange and unfamiliar' offer to society as a whole, could overcome ethnocentrism». To explain the origin of ethnocentrism, let's return to the conflict theory outlined in Cellan's research, which «attributes ethnic prejudice and hostility to the fear, apprehension or threat that the out-group poses to the in-group. Perceived or real, this threat gives rise to antagonistic attitudes and problematic behavior within ethnic groups. This is particularly the case between dominant and subordinate groups, when the latter compromise or challenge the position of the former, particularly with regard to the use of material resources, the political and economic status quo and social privileges (Bircan 2010).»

Intercultural communication takes on its full meaning in such cases: «Generally understood as a type of interaction in which people with different mentalities or worldviews come together to communicate, intercultural communication aims primarily to make sense of the cultural symbols and values of another culture, while enabling the other to do the same in order to overcome mutual misconceptions, prejudices and biases. This differs from transcultural communication, which simply compares one's own culture with that of the other, with a greater interest in getting to know the unfamiliar, and less in the cultural openness that enables one to integrate the other culture with one's own (Steiffatt and Millette 2009). Ethnocentrism thrives in the absence of intercultural communication» (Cellan, N., 2017).

Cellan (2017) continues, «Often, when cultures meet, they do so at an interpersonal level that requires self-disclosure and a willingness to listen to the other. The absence of dialogue between interacting cultures could lead to relational tensions and group conflicts that would then compromise social cohesion. In a highly globalized world, punctuated by mass migrations and constant displacement of populations, ethnocentrism can easily hinder economic progress, socio-cultural integration and political development».

It was a conscious decision to set out this third point as the ultimate aim of our literary reviews, analysis, questionnaires and interviews: intercultural communication. For us, it is the cornerstone of all interaction, of all communication, which is essentially intercultural.

Language learning was mentioned in the analysis of the questionnaires. Our analysis reveals that the vast majority (82%) of young people surveyed claim to speak English in addition to their mother tongue. Although it is difficult to establish a clear correlation between foreign language proficiency and access to intercultural experiences, as the former may stem from the latter, it is nonetheless important to remember that, in terms of communication, language is considered a key element in a person's integration into a new cultural, political, economic and social environment. Cellan explains that «(...) communication plays a coalescing role between the two, as they always involve communicative human interactions which, at different levels, require linguistic engagement.

In this regard, Selma, a Tunisian youth worker, explains: «among those who had the opportunity to live such experiences, language barriers were a major challenge, creating significant difficulties in communication and understanding».



«In the case of intercultural exchanges, however, language does not have a monopoly on function, nor does it play a fundamental role in bridging cultural gaps and overcoming prejudices. In some situations, a better command of the other group's language does not automatically translate into a deeper, more constructive intercultural bond.» (Cellan, 2017)

We can conclude that while culture is always ethnocentric to some extent, it is also something that is learned, dynamic and transmitted from one generation to the next (Samovar et al. 2009). And as the transmission of beliefs, values and attitudes, cognitive patterns and behaviors often takes place through communicative acts and processes, norms and values related to interculturality and intercultural communication in particular can also be taught, understood and adopted. Beyond learning about other cultures, intercultural communication facilitates learning from them.

«Interculturality is a source of acceptance of others' values in a world that suffers from wars and where cultural borders are built on cultural misunderstandings. Interculturality leads to greater tolerance, acceptance and, ultimately, stronger relationships between people of diverse backgrounds.» (Yesmine, Tunisia)

How can interculturality strengthen young people's commitment to a better world?

## VI. Commitment

Another of our objectives is to find out whether interculturality, whether experienced through a mobility process or not, is conducive to greater civic engagement on the part of young people in our target countries. We also want to know to what extent digital technology can facilitate this intercultural dynamic and civic commitment.

Before discussing these elements, we felt it essential to examine current forms of youth engagement in general, and in our four countries in particular.

### Defining commitment

As Dimacas (2023) explains, in the sociological context, engagement is often explored in relation to activism, although these terms are etymologically and conceptually distinct. Engagement evokes a promise or action to take a stand on political or social issues, involving personal responsibility (Larousse, 2023, CNRTL, 2023). It can be seen as putting the individual at stake for ideals or social causes (Cruces-Garcia, 2022). Ladrière (2016) suggests that engagement is distinguished by its opposition to indifference and non-participation. It can be seen as an act of decision-making in which the individual «puts himself partially or totally at stake» (Forero-Bulnes, 2020).

As such, engagement is often seen as a way for individuals to transform their world on their own scale (Renaudin, 2016). It offers a space where individuals can assert themselves, but it only gains momentum if it is part of a project that makes sense for everyone (Renaudin, 2016). De Bouver (2016), presents a notion of «existential activism» where actors engage not only through action, but also through retreat and inaction, thus highlighting a more nuanced form of commitment.

Militancy, on the other hand, has Latin roots linked to war, and is often used to describe specific political or trade union activities, linked to an institution, and carrying a notion of confrontation. Its scope is often limited to local, regional or national levels. Engagement, on the other hand, can transcend these institutional frameworks and focus on more global causes (Dimacas, 2023).

Dimacas points out that, although distinct, engagement and activism share a connotation of proactive action and

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7. In her research commissioned by ECLOSIO, Sophia Dimacas discusses the notion of commitment. She explains: «Faced with the same challenges of involving young people, Eclasio, the University of Liège's NGO, asked us to try and shed some light on the issue. That's how the embryo of this research was born, with the aim of understanding the mechanisms behind the commitment of young adults, and shedding light on their motivations and the meaning they give to their involvement in social and solidarity causes»

personal involvement, aimed at obtaining a quid pro quo, which, in a civic context, could be linked to a social or environmental cause (Cruces-Garcia, 2022). These concepts are all the more relevant in our era marked by globalization and the rise of digital technology, which facilitate and modify the modalities of engagement and activism.

Dimacas, which did not seek to distinguish or categorize young people's actions in reference to these two concepts, therefore retained «the concept of citizen engagement» referring to involvement and/or active participation, in collective activities or through individual steps explicitly undertaken, around an environmental or social cause that is based on humanistic and sustainable values, with the aim of facilitating change, whether individual, social and/or systemic, on a local and/or global scale» (Dimacas, 2023).

Dimacas completes this definition by inscribing the various forms of engagement of its subjects as fully part of the exercise of citizenship. «Indeed, whether commitment is exercised within the framework of an organization, an institution, in the associative fabric, in movements, or even in a personal process of change or by making particular lifestyle choices (Luycks & de Bouver, 2009), it expresses a desire to act for the collective. Dimacas (2023), referring to de Bouver (2016), reports that «in her study on the plural vision of commitment, (she) demonstrates that there are specific forms of commitment that are developing within the younger generations. In particular, she looks at one concept in particular, existential activism. This concept, raised by Arnspurger in 2009, is recognized as a form of commitment «where militant practices, human relations and attention to interiority are articulated». According to the author, these specific forms are «the bearers of new ways of investing politics» (de Bouver, 2016).

## What sphere of commitment for young people in our four countries?

In North Macedonia, specifically on the issue of interculturality, the general narrative highlights a move towards promoting interculturality and mutual understanding, both within the country and across the Balkan region. The emphasis is now on more community-based initiatives led by civil society, including representatives of the academic, entrepreneurial, sporting and cultural sectors, to further enhance intercultural dialogue and trust.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in promoting interculturality in North Macedonia. Their efforts encompass a wide range of initiatives, including the protection of minority rights, the organization of cultural exchange programs, and educational workshops aimed at promoting a multicultural narrative. They also advocate multicultural education within the formal education system, fostering a sense of unity and collaboration between different communities, religious groups and ethnicities. What's more, these NGOs' international collaborations extend their impact beyond national borders, contributing to global intercultural dialogue (SEGA Coalition, NGO Section). Alongside civil society, youth in North Macedonia have been particularly active in promoting intercultural understanding, engaging in various initiatives aimed at breaking down cultural barriers. Their involvement encompasses volunteer programs, workshops, cultural exchange programs, and the use of digital platforms to foster dialogue between diverse communities. These youth-led activities symbolize a sign of hope for a more inclusive and harmonious future, illustrating the tangible reality of unity through diversity in the emerging generation of North Macedonia (SEGA Coalition, Youth Section).

In Tunisia, Tunisian youth play a crucial role in the country's socio-political development, as stipulated in the Tunisian Constitution of 2014, which recognizes youth as a force for national construction (Tunisian Constitution of 2014, 2014). Youth engagement can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including volunteering, civic participation, and traditional and non-traditional political practices (OECD, 2017). However, civic participation requires an enabling framework created by the state, complemented by citizen action to positively influence the community and the country (UNFPA, n.d.a). Despite their notable role in the 2011 revolution, formal political engagement among young people remains low, as evidenced by their low participation in elections (UNFPA, n.d.a). Nevertheless, associative involvement has increased since the revolution, although its level remains relatively low in the context of democratic transition (UNFPA, n.d.a). Tunisian youth show a preference for alternative forms of expression, including artistic and cultural ones, also using social networks as a channel for expression and mobilization (UNFPA, n.d.a). Although youth participation in civil society is limited, it is perceived positively, particularly volunteering, which is seen as a means of promoting greater social inclusion (World Bank, n.d). Moreover, the majority of young Tunisians are consi-

dering emigration, motivated in part by aspirations for higher education and better life opportunities, with a notable emigration rate among higher education graduates (UNFPA, n.d.b). Young people's involvement in voluntary activities is motivated by personal and general interests, contributing to civic empowerment, although its growth depends on support from public authorities and civil society (Erudit, n.d). Young people's civic participation strengthens their political and civic commitment, although the success of this complementarity depends on the adaptability of public policies and parties to cultural and social changes (CEMI, n.d).

In France, the notion of youth engagement, often entangled with those of citizenship and participation in the discourse of public authorities, is not a new dynamic (Becquet, 2016). It manifests itself through «conventional and incentive-based» public action instruments, promoting a «civil citizenship» characterized by the direct, autonomous and voluntary engagement of young people in contractual relationships with the state (Becquet, 2016). The aim is to offer young people non-selective opportunities based on equality, inspired by the voluntary model (Becquet, 2016). Contemporary commitment tends more towards the transformation of the individual's own world rather than the global world, offering a space for individual affirmation, while seeking to inscribe this commitment in a meaningful collective project (Renaudin, 2016). However, the injunction of civic engagement by public authorities, particularly after critical events such as the 2015 attacks in France, raises questions about the authenticity of this engagement (Madelin, 2016). Citizen engagement, in its multifaceted nature, can vary from a local cause to a lasting commitment aimed at social transformation (Madelin, 2016). The transformation of forms of engagement, notably the weakening of structured social movements and classic partisan forms, raises questions about the ability of political powers to recognize and integrate these new forms of engagement (Madelin, 2016). Genuine citizen engagement requires empowerment and the acceptance of conflict, underlining the importance of recognizing citizens' expertise in a perspective of social transformation (Madelin, 2016). Referring to the individual and collective dimensions of engagement, Edgar Morin emphasizes the need for a complement specifying the cause deserving engagement, and stresses the salutary role of solidarity in a society marked by isolation and egocentricity (Morin & Calmejane-Gauzins, 2016). Commitment, according to Jean Bastide, ideally manifests itself in politics, a space for the free and effective engagement of citizens, symbolizing generality, globality, coherence and cohesion (Bastide, 1997).

In Belgium, young people's political commitment now extends beyond traditional forms, manifesting itself through a broader redefinition initiated in the movements of the 1970s, particularly those that emphasized the importance of the living environment. This dynamic is illustrated by the emergence of «existential activism», in which players become involved not only through action and participation, but also through moments of withdrawal and inaction, often perceived as signs of disengagement. This type of activism, according to De Bouver (2016), embodies a desire to transform the world by mobilizing people's capacity for imagination, action and participation, while also valuing the capacity for withdrawal and inaction traditionally associated with disengagement (De Bouver, 2016).

What's more, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed among young people in Brussels a grassroots social engagement, where the emphasis is on enriching social vitalities in working-class neighborhoods. Mandjombe and Boukezoula (2022) stress the importance of encouraging youth inclusion in local social investment to strengthen the culture of social ties. This approach aims to avoid the relegation of young people's commitment and responsibility, by recognizing them as useful players in their communities. By consolidating young people's social commitment, the authors argue that this can prevent today's young people's willingness to engage from turning into frustration and anger among tomorrow's adults (Mandjombe & Boukezoula, 2022).

## Youth disengagement or barriers to engagement?

As ENABEL<sup>8</sup> (2021) reports, one of the major challenges facing ECM players, and NGOs in general, is the declining commitment and mobilization of young adults. Dimacas adds: «In order to be able to implement solutions, it seems essential to have an informed understanding of how young people are engaged and mobilized today. What's more, in order to interact with individuals' levels of engagement, understanding the dimensions underlying the phenomenon seems paramount (Brault-Labbé & Dubé, 2009). In 2022, Eclasio commissioned research from the Faculty of

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8. Belgian Development Agency: <https://www.enabel.be/fr/>

Psychopedagogy at the University of Liège into the reasons behind young people's so-called disengagement. Sophia Dimacas' research «aims to understand the mechanisms at work behind young adults' commitment, and to shed light on their motivations and the meaning they give to their involvement in social and solidarity causes» (Dimacas, 2023). We propose to close this section on contemporary commitment by sharing the conclusions of Dimacas's research, which we regret not to set out exhaustively, as the question is so fascinating.

Dimacas concludes that there is a gap between what NGOs offer and what young people aspire to, rather than a lack of interest in social causes (Giraud, 2022). She writes: «Despite a decline in participation in traditional political spheres, young people remain concerned by societal issues, but express their commitment in alternative ways and often outside traditional institutional frameworks (Quéniart et al., 2007; Lardeux, 2016). With the evolution of societies and the rise of technologies, engagement is said to be migrating away from institutional structures towards more autonomous, diversified and informal forms, reflecting an adaptation to contemporary realities and a desire for concrete, local impact (Nicourd, 2008; Ion, 1997; Quéniart et al., 2007). This transition is part of a quest for meaning and personal fulfillment, while seeking to address pressing societal challenges (Harvard-Duclos & Nicourd, 2005 in Bleuzen, 2006; Lardeux, 2016). While traditional associative engagement remains a path taken by some young people, other, more flexible and responsive forms of engagement are gaining in popularity, reflecting a desire to act in ways that are more attuned to today's global challenges (de Bouver, 2016; Enabel, 2021; Giraud, 2022). The plurality of current forms of engagement would symbolize a dynamic response to the complex and interdependent challenges of our time, while seeking to maintain an active investment in the civic sphere (Perrineau, 1994 cited by Quéniart et al., 2007).» (Dimacas, 2023). She also highlights the importance of context in individual engagement, emphasizing that various external factors such as environment, relationships, and life course, influence an individual's propensity to engage and vice versa (Dimacas, 2023; Enabel, 2021).

This overview of youth engagement today is invaluable. Before investigating whether interculturality and digital technology can help strengthen youth engagement, we first needed to analyze contemporary youth engagement, in order to adapt our associative activities in relation to interculturality and digital technology, in line with the recommendations that were co-constructed during the Connexion-s project.

## VII. Interculturality, digital technology and commitment: elements for discussion

By way of conclusion, we can answer in the affirmative. Yes, we believe that interculturality is essential to engagement. If we consider that intercultural skills and the intercultural experience they enable enrich human beings from within.

Cohen-Emerique (2016) explains: «It was the culture shock that made this awareness possible. The clash with the other's culture, at its most disconcerting and strange, acts as a revelator: of one's own internalized culture, and of the most critical areas in the encounter. It's a question of culture shock on an individual level, as a reaction of disorientation, incomprehension; even more, of frustration or rejection, of revolt and anxiety - or, on the contrary, of positive astonishment or even admiration for a thing done.» She explains that culture shock reveals «... one's own cultural roots. With this method, getting to know the other comes first through getting to know oneself, with the provision of information or questioning about the other's culture coming only afterwards».

«I believe that interculturality is essential for young people, as it fosters open-mindedness, tolerance, personal development and enrichment, and prepares them to evolve. Interculturality can play an important role in reducing prejudice, promoting peace and helping to create global citizens capable of collaborating effectively with people from diverse cultures, while responding to the global challenges that concern them.» (Youth Worker, Tunisia) «

If we start from the above-mentioned forms of youth commitment as a quest for meaning and personal fulfillment from oneself, towards oneself, from the other and towards the other. So, yes, interculturality strengthens commitment in the sense that it links us to others, to causes that concern us all. As we explained earlier, technology is more than

just a means of communication, it's a space in itself and a place of commitment.

«Yes, young people are often actively engaged and involved in intercultural issues through social networks and digital technology. Social media and digital platforms offer a space for intercultural interactions, enabling young people to get in touch with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and learn about other cultures» (Lisa, Belgium).

Young people talk about the «global connections» possible via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok, which enable young people to get in touch with people from different countries, sharing experiences and cultural knowledge. This global connection is also made possible by language learning via apps such as Duolingo, Babbel and Rosetta Stone, which facilitate language learning and enable users to communicate with speakers of other languages, promoting intercultural understanding. Also, as a vehicle for cultural exchange and awareness-raising, they talk about the blogs and vlogs created by many young people to share their experiences when traveling or living in different countries, which promotes cultural awareness and understanding. Some consult YouTube, which hosts numerous channels dedicated to cultural exchange, where people from different cultures discuss traditions, languages and daily life. Others talk about online forums and communities, which play a key role in their engagement. Multiplayer online games are said to bring together players from all over the world, promoting teamwork and communication across cultural boundaries. Many people take online courses on platforms such as Coursera, edX and Khan Academy, which offer courses on intercultural communication, diversity and global issues, providing valuable educational resources. Also, various webinars, workshops and virtual events on intercultural topics enable young people to participate in discussions and obtain information from experts and enrich their worldview. Finally, they talk about their social activism when they join or support virtual campaigns, and digital petitions on cultural diversity, inclusion and social justice encourage young people to get involved and raise awareness of intercultural issues.

«Social media are powerful tools that respond to the interests of young people, who find themselves in friendly environments that respect their ideas and allow them to express themselves on different subjects» (Hela Nafti, Tunisia).

In this way, the Internet enables us to choose not only the format, but also the means of opening up to the world and engaging with it. Lisa (Belgium) says: «Yes, social networks are tools that enable us to discover other cultures and talk to people from all over the world. A lot of social and international struggles, and therefore intercultural struggles, go through social networks, because they bring together a lot of people and allow ideas and knowledge to spread widely. Many seminars and workshops are also organized online, many of which are only available to young people».

In an Inria article entitled «Le numérique peut-il favoriser l'engagement citoyen?», we read that while it's crucial not to deny the digital divide, Valérie Issarny insists on the virtual modality: «Proposing a digital interface enables the participation of a certain class of people, who are more likely to contribute via their PC or smartphone in transit than to go to a meeting in the evening» she stresses. «More than a replacement, it's a complementarity between physical meetings and virtual consultations that is envisaged. Because they can mobilize on a large scale and overcome technical heterogeneity, digital technologies can be a tool for participatory democracy. Far from confining us to the virtual, they actually encourage interaction between participants. A way to breathe new life into civic engagement». (Inria, 2022)

## VIII. Some recommendations co-constructed within the Connexion-s project

This study, based on science, on our experience as an association, and above all on what young people say and feel, has demonstrated the importance of interculturality for our societies, and more specifically for our young people from an early age. There is a need for interculturality, whether through mobility opportunities, the promotion of cultures at local level, or via digital technology, in order to develop intercultural skills.

To promote interculturality and commitment via digital means, particularly among young people, we propose several recommendations that have been co-constructed as part of this project:



Firstly, it is essential to integrate an intercultural program into school and university curricula, enabling students to learn about different cultures, traditions and global issues from an early age. This can be done by developing educational modules that focus on cultural diversity, history and global challenges (beyond language teaching). These programs can raise young people's awareness of the richness of cultural diversity and foster mutual respect.

More specifically, language learning programs should be encouraged to enable young people to communicate effectively with speakers of other languages, thereby strengthening intercultural understanding. Proficiency in a foreign language not only facilitates communication, but also the understanding of different cultural perspectives. This makes it easier for young people to interact with people from different cultures and develop strong intercultural bonds.

Supporting the cultural sector: organizing cultural events such as festivals, workshops and multicultural exhibitions enables young people to discover and celebrate different cultures. These events offer a unique opportunity to interact directly with representatives of other cultures, take part in traditional and artistic activities, and learn more about the diversity of the world around them. Encouraging them to actively participate in organizing and volunteering at these events reinforces their sense of belonging and pride in cultural diversity, while developing their sense of responsibility and leadership.

In addition, it is important to support and encourage young leaders to initiate intercultural projects and events within their communities, thus promoting peer-to-peer learning and youth empowerment. Youth-led initiatives are often the most effective in reaching their peers and bringing about real change in society. Providing grants and funding opportunities for intercultural youth-led initiatives enables them to implement creative and innovative projects, while developing their leadership and social entrepreneurship skills.

Finally, organizing workshops and training sessions on cultural awareness, stereotypes and unconscious biases encourages personal reflection and open-mindedness. These programs can help young people recognize and overcome their own prejudices, while teaching them to respect and value cultural diversity in their daily interactions. By developing their intercultural awareness, young people can become true agents of change in their communities, helping to promote a culture of peace and mutual understanding worldwide.

It is also crucial to provide training in digital skills to ensure that young people can safely and effectively navigate online platforms for intercultural interaction. Digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for young people to connect with people from all over the world and explore new cultures. However, it's important to make them aware of potential pitfalls such as misinformation, cyberstalking and prejudice online, and equip them with the skills they need to navigate the digital environment responsibly.

To foster responsible online behavior, it is necessary to educate young people about respectful communication and cultural sensitivity in online interactions. Awareness-raising programs can help them recognize and challenge their own prejudices, while teaching them to interact constructively and respectfully with individuals from different cultures.

In addition, youth workers and other professionals in contact with young people need to be trained in intercultural and digital skills, in order to create safe spaces for young people to exchange, dialogue and learn from each other. In terms of depoliticizing interculturality, the notion needs to be presented as a means of fostering peaceful cohabitation while respecting cultural identities. Encouraging young people's participation in community and cultural projects, as well as setting up educational programs on intercultural skills, will help to depoliticize interculturality and promote positive intercultural interactions.

Covid-19 has certainly encouraged digital openness to others. Young people have turned to social media, videoconferencing and other online tools to interact with people from different cultures, creating opportunities for intercultural exchange and dialogue without the need for physical travel. This Covid-19 pandemic has amplified the importance of digital technologies in promoting interculturality. However, it is crucial to ensure that all young people have access to the necessary information and resources, and to simplify visa application processes to fa-

Facilitate intercultural exchange, particularly in a context where international travel can be limited. To help young people access intercultural experiences, it is essential, first and foremost, to raise awareness of the intercultural opportunities available. This could be done through information campaigns, orientation sessions and online resources to guide young people towards intercultural experiences tailored to their interests.

Indeed, simplifying visa procedures and offering reduced or waived fees, as well as fast processing times, would greatly facilitate intercultural exchanges and reduce administrative hurdles. Young people are often held back in their intercultural exploration efforts by the high costs and bureaucratic formalities associated with obtaining visas. By simplifying these processes, governments can encourage more young people to engage in enriching intercultural experiences.

Promoting interculturality among young people requires a holistic and integrated approach, combining formal and informal education and skills development. By adopting these recommendations, we could move towards more inclusive and interconnected societies, where interculturality becomes a lived and celebrated reality, moving beyond the stage of a mere proclaimed value.

When it comes to using social networks to share intercultural experiences, it's important to highlight inspiring stories and create safe online communities where young people can share their experiences without fear of judgment. Training young people to use social networks responsibly and respectfully is also essential to encourage positive online behavior. Young people need to be made aware of potential risks such as misinformation, cyber-bullying and prejudice online, and equipped with the skills to navigate the digital environment responsibly.

To encourage the use of digital technology as a tool to facilitate interculturality, several courses of action emerge.

Firstly, it's important to integrate interactive activities such as pair or group brainstorming, sharing lesson plans or educational modules. These methods help to engage participants and enable them to interact collaboratively, even at a distance.

What's more, it's crucial to train participants in digital tools prior to activities to reduce the digital knowledge gap and ensure active participation by all.

As a youth worker, it's essential to clarify the objectives of digital interactions or online discussions, understand participants' digital literacy<sup>9</sup> levels and expectations, and create a respectful online space where everyone feels comfortable sharing their views. It's also important to use clear, concise language in online communication, and to adapt to different digital platforms to ensure accessibility for all.

Furthermore, digital can support engagement by integrating gamification elements, such as points, badges and rankings, into digital applications to make activities more motivating. Social networks and digital communication tools can also foster engagement by enabling sharing, discussion and collaboration with target groups around the world.

When it comes to digital education, we need to organize training, workshops and courses in our organizations to strengthen participants' digital skills. It's also important to offer free courses for all, in order to reduce the digital divide and promote inclusion.

Finally, to enhance intercultural encounters through digital means, it is essential to ensure that all participants can access information in their mother tongue, or correspond with a translator if necessary. In addition, we need to be aware of the risks and limits of digital technology, particularly with regard to inequalities and barriers to interculturality, and take care not to widen the digital divide between different populations. By incorporating these

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9. Literacy refers to the ability to read, write and understand written text. It goes beyond the simple ability to decipher words and also encompasses the understanding and interpretation of written content. Literacy also includes the ability to analyse and critically evaluate the information presented in a text, as well as the ability to use writing to express oneself and communicate effectively. In short, literacy is an essential skill that enables individuals to participate fully in modern society and engage critically with the world around them.

recommendations, we can fully exploit the potential of digital technology to foster an enriching and inclusive intercultural encounter.

## Conclusion

«Confronting the intercultural question means first and foremost a willingness to question oneself, to question the obvious, and above all to envisage common ways of living together. A willingness that includes rather than integrates, because it authorizes and enables the other to take part, to participate «in the same way as». The technical aspects - mediation, communication - are therefore means at the service of this project». (Bortolini, 2022)

In conclusion, we'd like to end with this quote from Bortolini (2022), which clearly demonstrates that interculturality must be seen as empowerment for citizens, but also for society as an entity in perpetual mutation. To achieve this, we need to be as close as possible to our young people in order to co-construct with them and from them, according to their modes of engagement (withdrawal, inaction, multi-thematic, more global causes, non-institutional frameworks) and for the future they desire and deserve: more inclusive and sustainable.

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