

# How Can Intercultural Learning Contribute to Sustainable Living?

## A study case in Ljubljana, Slovenia

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### **Introduction:**

The migration – sustainable development paradox addresses the fact that migration contributes to sustainable development if well integrated into policymaking across the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>1</sup> Migration enriches interculturalism and cross-cultural cooperation; culture is an enabler and driver for sustainable development, for example, during the pandemic and lockdowns, traditional knowledge of sustainable living that does not rely on mass production and consumption was most needed; therefore, culture is an essential resource for sustainable development. Meanwhile, migration enables cooperation across and between different cultures.

How can intercultural learning enabled by migration increase the value of culture for sustainable living? Migration makes cities intercultural, or at least multi-cultural; how does facilitating intercultural communication and learning between individuals, communities, and groups from various backgrounds living in one town contribute to sustainable living?

### **Methodology**

In this case study, we first establish the initial framework based on desk research, where we highlight the general framework where interculturalism may contribute to the pursuit of SDGs and their targets. Based on this framework, we create concrete questions to be explored and reframed in a seminar.

### **About the seminar and the participants**

We conducted an interactive seminar with eleven individuals coming from different backgrounds and living in Slovenia: the eleven participants identify themselves as coming from Slovenia (5), Iraq (2), Iran (1), Palestine (2), Algeria (1), and are permanent residents of Slovenia. The seminar was designed based on the desk research and was facilitated by an experiential trainer for intercultural communication who is a Jordanian citizen and permanent resident of Slovenia. The seminar's outcomes will validate the conceptual, theoretical framework for providing practical examples of how intercultural learning may contribute to sustainable living. The group taking part in this seminar is an intercultural group that took part in previous intercultural community-building activities managed by the Povod institute for culture and development of international relations in culture in Slovenia. Eight out of the eleven participants identify as women, while three identify as men. We validated the initial theoretical framework during the seminar based on the participants' inputs.

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<sup>1</sup> [Gavonel et al. The migration-sustainability paradox: transformations in mobile worlds, 2021](#)

## **Crossing issues where intercultural learning may contribute to the achievement of Agenda 2030**

In this case study, we focused on interculturalism rather than multiculturalism; this is because we aimed to facilitate a learning environment where individuals learn from one another and not only passively share one environment.<sup>2</sup> Further, we used the expression of learning rather than education; because learning is a process taking place in any formal, informal, or non-formal setting; it is a process of discovering new understandings, new skills, attitudes, and knowledge. This process can happen internally, such as self-directed learning,<sup>3</sup> or in a formal, non-formal or informal educational setting. Intercultural learning promotes lifelong learning which is an essential part of SDG4 that promotes ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Before digitalization, in different cultures, members of one society played social and traditional games as part of socializing; these traditional games are also essential for developing communication skills and, therefore, crucial for lifelong learning. Sharing these traditional games may increase intercultural sensitivity while promoting traditional social games for skills development; it also brings people together, which supports inclusive societies that are essential for the Agenda 2030.

To integrate sustainable development into intercultural learning, we need to incorporate the latter into global learning with an anti-anthropocentric approach to produce intercultural solutions to everyday challenges we face, such as climate change, declining biodiversity, unsustainable consumption, and income disparity.<sup>4</sup> Culture contributes to economic growth in a sustainable manner; this includes tourism, creative industries, food security, agriculture, medicine, and sustainable energy. Therefore, exchanging different cultural pieces of knowledge contributes to sustainable solutions for development.

Integrating sustainable development with intercultural learning shall take into consideration a well-being approach; for example, the well-being index measures factors that contribute to the well-being of societies and individuals regardless of the economic value of the GDP per capita; this is an index that replaces financial perspective with the green, social and circular economy. Intercultural learning enables finding solutions to achieve sustainable development goals like SDG12: Responsible consumption and production by exchanging pieces of traditional knowledge on preserving food, recycling, minimizing waste, and thus contribute to the well-being index.

We conclude this section with an initial framework that suggests examining the value of intercultural learning for sustainable development for the following topics: 1. intercultural learning for quality

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<sup>2</sup> [INTERCULTURAL VS MULTICULTURAL: WHY THIS DIFFERENCE MATTERS, 2021](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Difference Between Education and Learning](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Blair and Shealy, Intercultural Competence for a Sustainable Planet: Principles, Practice, and Outcomes, 2017](#)

education; 2. intercultural knowledge for health and wellbeing; 3. intercultural best zero waste practices; 4. intercultural experiences for sustainable cities; and 5. intercultural learning for affordable and clean energy.

This initial framework was edited and developed throughout the second stage of this case study which consisted of a seminar that gathered eleven persons from various ethnic backgrounds living in Slovenia. In the seminar, we used non-formal educational tools to first decode and unpack the terminology of interculturalism, intercultural learning, and sustainable living. Later on, we personalized the topic by taking sustainable development from its theoretical contexts and applying it to daily life issues. After defining concrete problems, the participants worked in intercultural subgroups to use different cultural knowledge to create solutions to these issues. We concluded by presenting intercultural solutions for sustainable development created and shared by the participants of this case study.

After the seminar, we reviewed the initial framework by adding two more subtopics created and added by the participants: 6. intercultural learning to end gender-based discrimination against people who identify as women, and 7. intercultural understanding to end ethnic-based discrimination. Therefore, our final framework for investigating how intercultural learning can contribute to sustainable living covers the following areas:

1. Intercultural learning for quality education
2. Intercultural knowledge for health and wellbeing
3. Intercultural best Zero Waste practices
4. Intercultural experiences for sustainable cities
5. Intercultural learning for affordable and clean energy
6. Intercultural learning to end gender-based discrimination against people who identify as women
7. Intercultural understanding to end ethnic-based discrimination

### **Personalizing sustainable development, what kind of issues do the participants of this case study identify as problems that hinder sustainable living?**

We started our seminar by decoding and unpacking the terminology: interculturalism, sustainable development, and sustainable living. The participants had different definitions for the terms; for some, sustainability was connected to financial security, for others, it was linked to climate change and the environment; some see sustainable living as a healthy lifestyle and good nutrition. The participants had a common yet diverse understanding of interculturalism and intercultural societies; some participants referred to intercultural societies as consisting of individuals from various ethnic backgrounds. For others, diversity was not enough to identify one society as intercultural and found it equally important to have equality and justice accompanying diversity. The participants decoded the difference between

interculturalism and multiculturalism, where multiculturalism refers to co-existence while interculturalism relates to cooperation and interactions between different ethnic groups in one society.

After decoding the terminology, we presented the Agenda 2030 to the participants, and they took their time to explore and read about SDGs in their preferred languages. Afterwards, each participant came up with a particular problem that they observed in their surroundings and is connected to the sustainable development goals; we came up with twelve concrete issues that overlapped. The participants divided themselves into four subgroups; each group chose a few issues to work on and found solutions based on pieces of their cultural knowledge. The groups were mixed and contained individuals of different ethnicities. Below we list the groups with the issues they chose to work on:

- Group one: Ala'a (Iraq) and Naiem (Palestine) worked on the issues of ethnic and gender-based discrimination in SDG10 and SDG5 and lifelong learning for quality education in SDG4.
- Group two: Behnaz (Iran), Safa (Iraq), and Bhagavati (Slovenia) worked on solving the issue of mass meat consumption as part of assuring sustainable consumption patterns under SDG12.
- Group three: Nudjoud (Algeria), Saša (Slovenia), and Tim (Slovenia) worked on energy efficiency and SDG7, and the issues of food security and zero hunger as part of SDG2.
- Group four: Nahla (Palestine, Gaza), Amadeja (Slovenia), and Primož (Slovenia) worked on the issue of zero waste and sustainable food production as part of SDGs 12 and 2.

In the following sections, we will present each group's work by elaborating further on the issues they selected and the solutions they came up with based on their cultural knowledge and the intercultural exchanges in their group.

### **Intercultural learning and migration as enablers for gender equality for people who identify as women**

In the work of subgroup one, Ala'a, who identifies as a woman coming from Iraq and living in Slovenia, noted that enforced gender roles were more prevalent in home countries when speaking about Arab communities. She elaborated with the example of from Baghdad, Iraq, where enforced social gender roles limit women to household chores, while migration changed these imposed roles due to the need for migrant women to work to ensure a more sustainable income for the family. She said that intercultural experiences change the burdens imposed by enforced gender roles "for example, women in some areas of Iraq cannot drive due to enforced gender roles; when migrating and seeing different gender roles, these roles changed and now I see many Arab migrant women who achieved a lot on their professional and personal development journeys." Ala'a added that this remark does not mean that migrant women coming from Arabic cultural backgrounds are passive; it means the opposite – many migrant women are role models for personal and professional development. After each subgroup presentation, we opened space for the whole group to ask questions or make interventions. Nudjoud

(Algeria) commented that while she was raised in an Arab community, those enforced gender roles were not present in her environment, and she feels that people who identify as women had all equal access to all opportunities. She added that by this she is pointing out the diversity and different realities within the Arab migrant communities. Both participants agreed on the diverse realities that exist between individuals of one community as well as between communities.

### **Storytelling for intercultural learning and ending discrimination based on ethnicity**

In subgroup one, Naiem (Palestine) raised the issue of discrimination based on ethnicity that refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East face in Slovenia. Group one shared possible causes that may fuel xenophobia and contribute to discrimination based on ethnicity, such as false information and hate speech against asylum seekers and refugees coming from the Middle East in mainstream media. This discrimination might limit access to equal opportunities and housing for people who are refugees and coming from the Middle East. Naiem shared the idea of storytelling for intercultural learning to end xenophobia fueled by false news about asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle East. He presented the “Tukaj smo” initiative, which means “We Are Here” in English. It is an initiative that asylum seekers and refugees started in Slovenia, where they tell their stories, positive and negative ones alike. This creates an alternative platform to tell real stories and debunk false information about asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle East in Slovenia. The “Tukaj smo” initiative also advocates for ending discrimination against asylum seekers and the violations happening against them in the detention centers. Group one discussed and shared potential ideas on how the “Tukaj smo” initiative could be adapted and duplicated to fight gender-based discrimination against people who identify as women in the Arab migrant communities.

### **Intercultural learning for lifelong learning and quality education**

Ala’a (Iraq) from group one shared about the issues of social distance due to social media and digitalization and the lack of outdoor social activities for lifelong learning. The group talked about the negative impacts of social distancing on mental health and social cohesion. Ala’a presented old traditional games from the Iraqi heritage and their effects on adults' soft skills development, including emotional intelligence. One of these games is the “Mahbas” game, which means the “Ring” in Arabic. It is a game that people from different age groups play after the Iftar in Ramadan; the rules are as follows:

First round:

1. Two groups are set in two rows facing each other
2. Each group chooses a leader
3. All members in the first group put their hands behind their backs
4. The leader walks behind their group holding a ring

5. The team leader places the ring in the hand of one of their team members.

Note: these instructions may be adapted based on the participants' physical conditions to ensure they are not ableist.

Second round:

1. All members in group one show both hands closed in front of them
2. The second group chooses one person to try to guess whose hand the ring is. The other members in the second group may help this person
3. The person in charge of guessing can say "this" or "open." Using "this" can narrow down the options for guessing, but if they say "this" and the ring is there, they lose. The group fails when the guesser says "open," and the ring is not there.

Third round:

If the group finds out where the ring is, they win one point. In the following stage, the two groups switch roles, and the game continues until there is a winner with more points or until the participants decide to end the game.

The "Mahbas" game from the Iraqi heritage increases emotional intelligence, since the participants pay attention to the body language of other players and their emotional state as they try to guess whether other participants have the ring or not. It also enhances teamwork skills in supporting each other. When accompanying such games with the experiential learning cycle, people may reflect on their teamwork skills including leadership skills, as well as their ability to build a strategy and their attitude toward risk assessment; all these skills are essential for civic and social engagement.

### **Intercultural culinary arts for sustainable consumption**

Group two with Behnaz (Iran), Bhagavati (Slovenia), and Safa (Iraq), chose the topic of mass meat consumption and production due to its impact on the environment and climate change. The group also talked about diseases caused by excessive meat consumption; they also connected the topic to the concept of global learning, considering an anti-anthropocentric point of view that considers animal rights. The group presented reasonable and affordable nutrition solutions based on replacing meat through intercultural culinary arts from Iran, the Levant area, Iraq, and Slovenia.

### **Intercultural exchanges for energy efficiency, food security, and zero hunger**

Group number three, Nudjoud (Alegria), Saša (Slovenia), and Tim (Slovenia), discussed issues regarding energy efficiency, food storage, food security, and zero hunger. They exchanged good practices and old knowledge about preserving food such as meat, fruit, and vegetables without refrigerators. Nudjoud shared ancient traditional knowledge from Algeria of preserving meat by drying it and using salt; meanwhile, Saša and Tim shared about old traditional techniques from Slovenia for

storing vegetables, using sand to cover carrots and potatoes instead of using a refrigerator. Nudjoud shared about storing food in containers made out of clay. The participants learned from each other how traditional ways of preserving food might achieve the target of energy efficiency of SDG7.

### **Intercultural exchanges to reduce consumerism**

In group four, Nahla (Gaza, Palestine), Amadeja (Slovenia), and Primož (Slovenia) decided to work on the issue of consumerism due to its adverse effects on the environment, as the demand for goods increases the need to produce. This leads to more pollutant emissions, increased land use and deforestation, and accelerated climate change.<sup>5</sup>

Nahla had different reasons to be added based on her experience of living with her family in the open siege of the Gaza Strip before they moved to Slovenia. She presented a typical solution for the lack of resources where each house in Gaza uses old clothes to produce school bags, school equipment, wallets or even blankets. She presented products made from old and unneeded materials from her house to the group. The people of Gaza living in the siege do not have sufficient access to stores, especially under the Israeli occupation, airstrikes, and apartheid. The people of Gaza have limited access to even essential services like medical care. Nahla also presented practical techniques for recycling household waste into various products, including gardening tools. She shared further about her membership in the No-Borders craft in Slovenia, a group founded by people who identify as women and are migrants, refugees, locals and activists, who recycle for handicraft and activism. Primož and Amadeja talked about Slovenia's growing second-hand shop culture and open bazaars for exchanging commodities; they linked it with the older tradition where people were exchanging goods instead of consumerism in Slovenia.

### **Conclusion**

Intercultural learning is a lifelong learning process that may take place in any formal, nonformal, or informal setting; it is a process that may happen internally through self-directed learning or within a group. To activate intercultural learning for sustainable development, we shall consider the process from a non-anthropocentric and a non-ethnocentric point of view, where individuals with various cultural backgrounds learn inclusively from each other in a context that considers other beings, such as plants, animals, and the environment surrounding them. Through this case study, we elaborated on critical issues where learning through intercultural exchanges may contribute to building inclusive and sustainable societies that are responsive to the Agenda 2030. First, we created an initial framework through desk research, which shows that culture is studied as a considerable agent in achieving the sustainable development goals. More studies shall be conducted to unleash the power of intercultural learning as an enhancer of the role of culture for sustainable development from non-anthropocentric and non-ethnocentric points of view. After the desk research, we tested the framework in an interactive

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<sup>5</sup> [Green Tumble, The Negative Effects of Consumerism, 2016](#)



seminar that gathered eleven individuals who live in Slovenia and identify themselves as coming from Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Algeria, and Slovenia.

Through intercultural exchanges for sustainable living, the participants of this case study personalized the concept of sustainable development, applying it onto concrete issues that hinder sustainable living in their surroundings. Later on, and through intercultural learning, they came up with concrete solutions for these issues, and we reviewed the initial framework by adding more subtopics where intercultural exchanges as a form of intercultural learning contribute to sustainable living. In conclusion, this case study is a proof that intercultural learning is a vital tool for achieving zero hunger, food security, zero waste, responsible consumption and production and energy efficiency, as well as for reducing inequalities and eliminating ethnic-based and gender-based discrimination, especially against people who identify as women. This case study has its limitations because the topics are vast, the participants and the desk research could not cover all the topics that fall under the themes of interculturalism and sustainable development, and it does not thoroughly test the solutions provided by the participants. Yet, this case study is essential as a base to build on; therefore, it is a critical study to inspire further participatory researchers to investigate, test and document the valuable solutions for sustainable development by integrating intercultural learning with sustainability for inclusive and sustainable societies.