Reading Material 2

Where should we start when we design a project? An introduction on the Theory of Change model

Look at the icons below. They all refer to elements which are relevant when we start designing an intercultural project.

ACTIVITIES — Programme, logistics, material

GOOD IDEAS — Creative, involving, innovative ideas

MANAGEMENT SKILLS — Competence in managing projects

METHODS — Educational tools, media equipment

MONEY — Grants, funders, donations

REAL NEEDS — Analysis of the local context, problems, issues

PARTNERSHIP — Reliable partners, stakeholders

RESOURCES — Office, staff, accountant, trainers

VOLUNTEERS — Support persons, participants

WRITING SKILLS — Writing applications experience

We need MONEY, for sure, but also RESOURCES (an office, digital equipment, a functioning organisation with a staff and a board) and MANAGEMENT SKILLS and WRITING SKILLS (to design a project application, to manage the following steps if we receive the grant, to report...). Of course, we need PARTNERS for international projects and VOLUNTEERS (or participants) to be involved in ACTIVITIES based on GOOD IDEAS

and solid educational METHODS. And all of this should match with concrete NEEDS (of our organisation, the local community, a specific target group...).

So many requirements! Where should we start? What are the most important elements? Does it have to be always so complicated? And what if I start right away without planning?

You can find many different approaches and project management models. Some organisations prefer focusing on the implementation, others prefer giving priority to the quality of the partnership, others can concentrate all their efforts in writing as many applications as possible, in order to obtain financial contributions for their staff and activities.

Let's analyse a couple of models that can be used to design and implement projects.

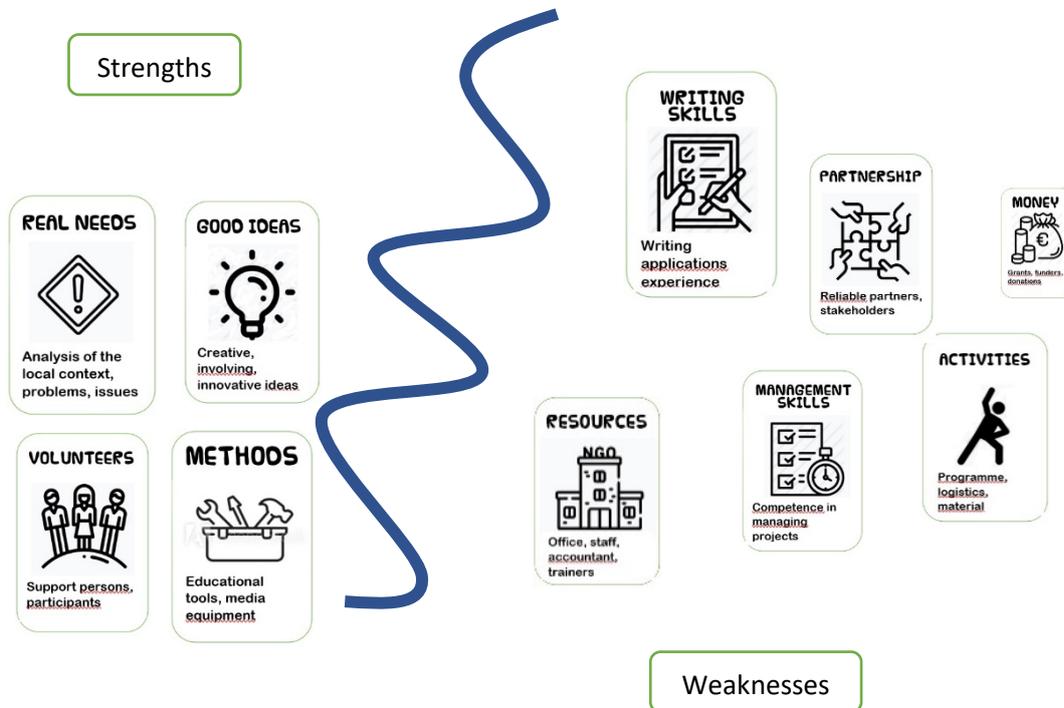**Example A: The "Take the money and run" model**
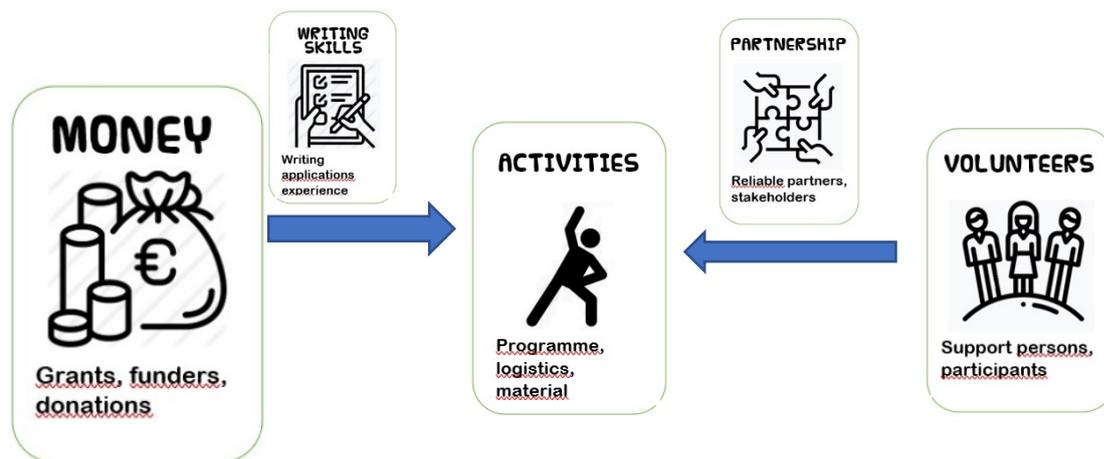
In the "Take the money and run" model, the focus of the organisation is on the grant. Writing skills are essential in order to submit successful applications. Partnership, agreements, objectives, local needs do not have the priority. Only in case of project approval, the organisation starts arranging logistics, and the methods and contents of the activities. Partners will provide volunteers/participants, but they are not involved in the project design or implementation. This model can be compared to a "project factory" or a "hamster in the wheel". The main aim of the organisation is to write project applications to obtain a grant. The grant will allow the organisation to pay the bills and the staff fees (most important thing) and to implement the activity, and so on… The project is just an instrument to obtain the grant and to ensure the financial survival of the organisation. Change, impact, values, mission and vision do not have an essential role in this model.

Time to reflect!

- What do you think of this model?
- Imagine you have won 10.000 € at the lottery. Do you spend them in hiring the best project writer in Europe in order to be sure to obtain a grant; or do you use them to build the capacity of your organisation (to train staff, trainers, activists)?
- Have you ever heard of the concepts of "Mission" and "Vision"? (scroll until the end of this document to know more!). Do you think that an NGO that uses the "Take the money and run" model has strong values, and a clear mission and vision?

Example B: the "Good will" model

Strengths

REAL NEEDS
Analysis of the local context, problems, issues

GOOD IDEAS
Creative, involving, innovative ideas

VOLUNTEERS
Support persons, participants

METHODS
Educational tools, media equipment

WRITING SKILLS
Writing applications experience

PARTNERSHIP
Reliable partners, stakeholders

MONEY
Grants, funders, donations

RESOURCES
NGO
Office, staff, accountant, trainers

MANAGEMENT SKILLS
Competence in managing projects

ACTIVITIES
Programme, logistics, material

Weaknesses

The "good will" model is usually typical of unexperienced and "young" organisations. The activists are enthusiastic and would like to contribute to a real change on behalf of their communities, but they don't have yet enough experience in the project management field. They might have great ideas, a good volunteers base, familiarity with NFE tools and a good knowledge of the needs of the context where they live. However, they can be too idealistic, and might overlook the logistic dimension, the financial resources, the knowledge and experience they need in writing and managing projects. For this reason, in spite of their "good will", they can meet obstacles in obtaining a grant (this is the reason why the "MONEY" icon is small and far away in the model). Furthermore, they might meet problems in finding partners for their projects, due to their poor international experience. In this case, it would be preferable to be involved in a project as a partner, and not as an applicant, in order to learn more and to gain skills gradually. After building their knowledge, networking skills and self-confidence, they will be able to design and coordinate complex projects.

Time to reflect!

- You think that you have a great idea for a project, but it seems that nobody wants to support you! Has it ever happened to you? Have you ever experienced this situation? What did you do?
- Imagine you are a very young activist who wishes to design and manage intercultural activities...how would you start gaining experience? What strategy would you adopt?
- Do you think it is a good idea to try to coordinate an activity with ZERO experience in the field of intercultural projects? Maybe this is the best and fastest way to learn skills...by doing mistakes! Or maybe it will not work...

A model inspired by the Theory of Change

The model below, apparently quite complicated, is inspired by the Theory of Change (ToC). The ToC is a specific type of methodology for planning, participation, and evaluation that is used in non-profit and government sectors to promote social change.
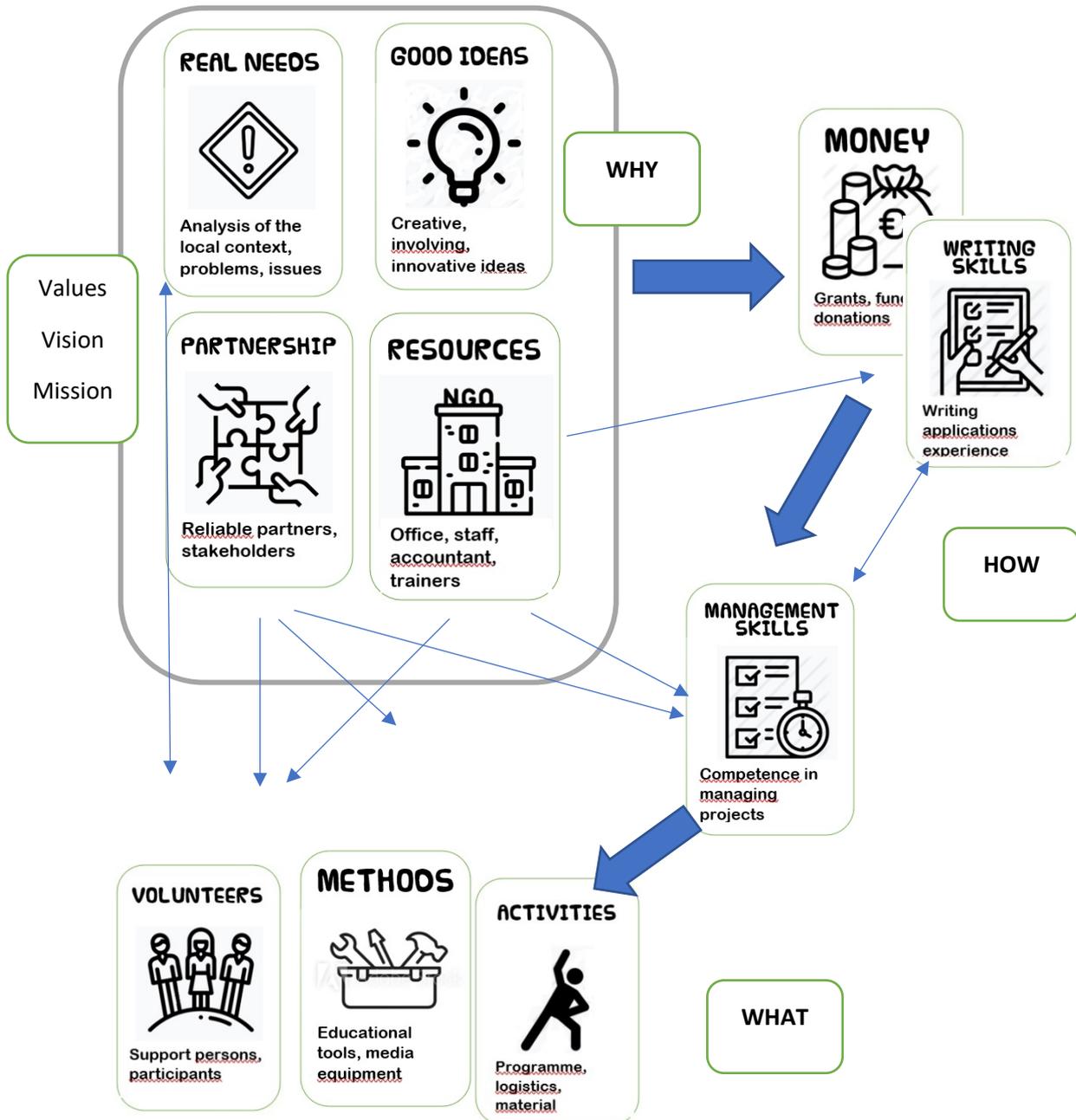
1. Why – 2. How – 3. What

According to the model above, the first step in the project design should consist in the analysis of needs. Possibly, this step should be addressed involving the partners and the future beneficiaries of the project. Only after, when the "WHY?" question is clearly answered, it will be possible to define the following steps: "HOW" to find the financial resources to implement the project, and "WHAT" to do. If you pay attention, you will notice that many grant application forms start by asking the questions "why do you want to do this project?" and not by asking "what do you want to do?". The focus is on WHY: your values, your vision, your mission, the needs you want to address.

Sometimes it happens that project managers start with the "WHAT?" question. They might "fall in love" with a particularly activity, but maybe this activity doesn't meet the needs of the potential participants, of the local community, of the organisation. Therefore, it is always better to start with the needs' analysis. It is also important to assess the capacity of the applicant, as this step will be essential for an effective implementation of the project (for example, if the organisation is understaffed, it might face problems with the administration of the grant). In addition to that, before applying to a grant, you should ask yourself: is this grant compatible with the activities carried out but my organisation? For example, if you work for an environmental organisation, is it worthwhile to apply at any cost for a grant that supports sport and recreational activities? Maybe you should look for more compatible grant opportunities (that will allow to meet the needs you identified), instead of "twisting" the profile of your expertise and of your organisation in order to adapt them to the grant criteria. This is why a reflection on "vision, mission and values" is important: if you know clearly what your organisation stands for, you will be able to better identify the financial opportunities that will support your ideas, meet your needs and allow you to implement your strategy.

An organisation can write an application using its own resources or cooperating with free-lances, or volunteers/activists who has a strong writing experience. It would be preferable that those who write the project are also involved in its management, as they can provide details, guidance and tips during the implementation and evaluation phase.

In this model, partners are not a simple "participants' or volunteers' providers" (like in the "Take the money and run" model). Partners are actively involved in the step of project design, and this approach is necessary to avoid potential misunderstandings and conflicts in the implementation phase. During the activities, partners can provide

their expertise, their trainers, their methods. They can play a monitoring role and can be involved in the creation of the narrative and financial report. If the agreements are clear, they will select and prepare the participants for their activities and will propose constructive alternatives in case of obstacles.

Time to reflect!

- Is this model too complicated? Do you think that it can really produce a change?
- Do you think it requires time to obtain the skills to run effective projects?
- Is a participatory approach always productive? What if partners do not cooperate?

Do you want to learn more about the Theory of Change? Here are some useful links:

https://www.theoryofchange.org/ : a website with interesting resources on ToC

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJDN0cpxJv4 : a short animated presentation on ToC

https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/nonprofit-management-tools-and-trends/mission-and-vision-statements : clear definitions of "Vision" and "Mission"