

Learning from

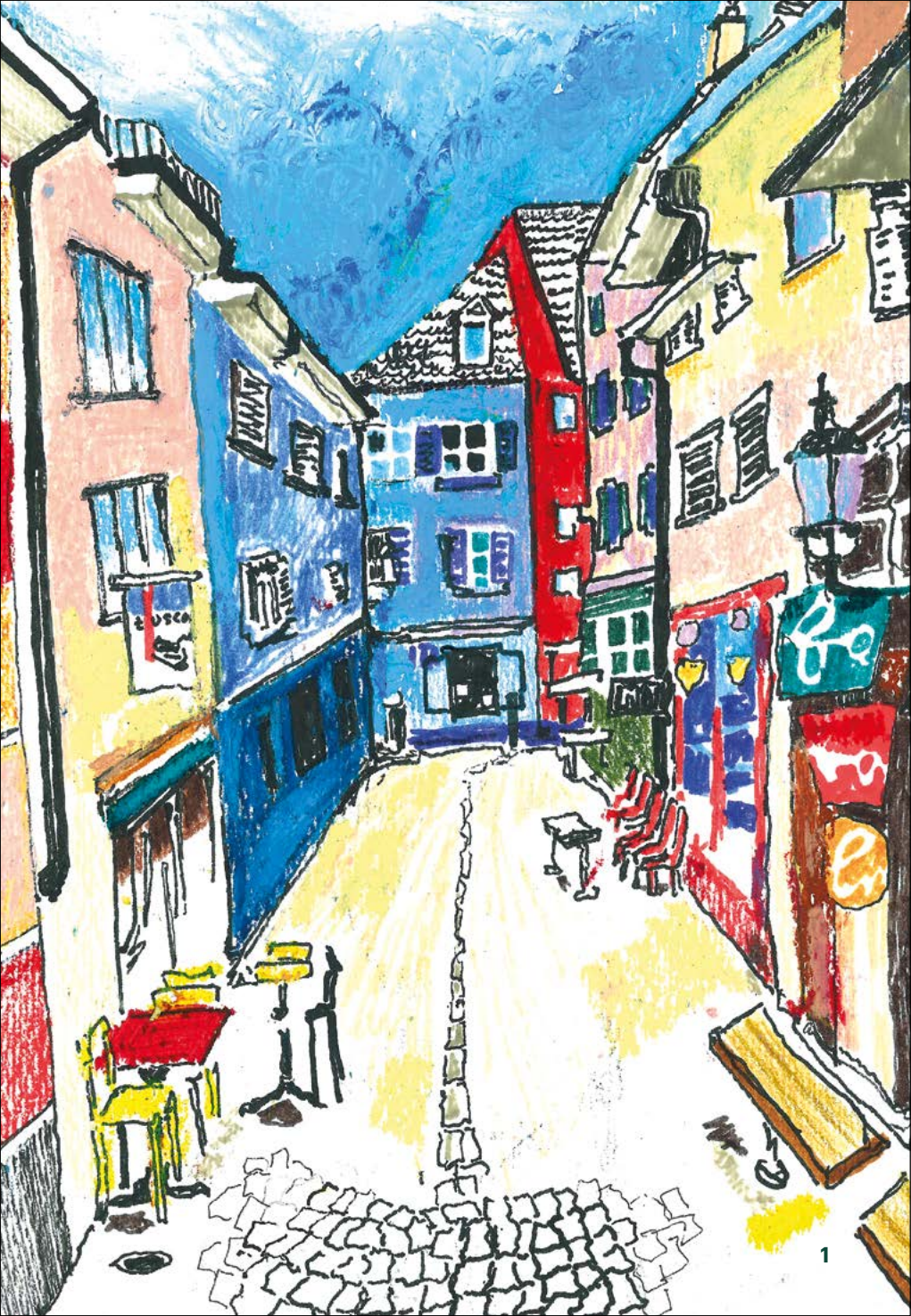
**Inequality**

**Educational exchange  
between universities  
in Switzerland and in  
fragile regions**



**Experiences from a  
*Movetia* pilot project  
at Zurich University  
of the Arts**





"It was only when I spoke to my fellow students in Cairo that I understood what the right to freedom of expression means."

Ralph, exchange student from Thun

"Suddenly I realized that art in Switzerland has to do with creating new things, things that have never existed before. It's quite different here. For us, it's primarily about preserving traditions so that they are not forgotten."

Armine, exchange student from Yerevan

"At first I was shocked: in my neighbourhood in Baghdad there was only water for two hours twice a day! Then you have to fill all the containers immediately. That's when I realized: OK, this is climate change!"

Marianne, exchange student from Basel

"I am very grateful for the opportunity to familiarize myself with the work of my colleagues in Switzerland. They give the students more room for discussion and group work—I certainly take that with me. On the other hand, I sometimes had the impression that the lecturers were afraid to demand anything from the students. We talked about it for a while. Maybe it has something to do with the busy timetable."

Dani, lecturer from the Ivory Coast

"People look at 'the West' very differently from there. The criticism is that we talk a big game about how everything should be, but don't do much of it ourselves. I can understand that to some extent. Instead of big words, we urgently need to start working together. The semester in Beirut was a start for me."

Christian, exchange student from Zurich

"There is a textile design scene in Nairobi that we can only dream of. The studios are quite basic, nobody works with computers like that here anymore, but people improvise, come up with ideas and the results speak for themselves. Even expensive international labels buy here."

Bitta, exchange student from St.Gallen

"It took almost two months before I was able to relax, before I realized that the buzzing noise outside wasn't a danger. Then I tried to soak up as much as I could at the university, to benefit from all the opportunities here. Maybe it was also to combat homesickness. When I go back now, I think I'm a bit of a different person."

Piotr, student from Kharkiv

"The rich have their own universities in Pakistan, very expensive ones, good ones too, I think. But I went to a state university and I'm glad I did. It was much more mixed, I had colleagues from very different families. It was like a privilege for everyone to study. Some even had to support their siblings on top of that. Education is extremely important there. When I came home, I had a crisis at first."

Omri, exchange student from Bern

### Fragile regions

The term “fragility” has been established in international cooperation for more than 10 years. Globally active organizations (OECD, UN, WHO, etc.) have developed slightly different definitions. Overall, the fragility of states, regions or communities is a combination of high risk exposure and insufficient coping capacity: for example, a fragile state is no longer able to guarantee security and the rule of law for its population and provide basic public services for certain reasons. Poverty, violence, corruption and political despotism then usually determine people's everyday lives. Common reasons for such a collapse of a community are wars, authoritarian power structures, climate change, pandemics—usually a combination of these factors, which is also expressed in the term “fragile and conflict-affected regions”.

According to OECD criteria<sup>3</sup>, 1.9 billion people (24% of the world's population) are currently confronted with a fragile living environment. Many of them are denied access to in-depth education, yet education would be the most important factor in reducing fragility.

# Learning from Inequality

Since 2022, *Movetia*, the national agency for exchange and mobility in education, has been supporting educational visits and exchange programmes not only in Switzerland and Europe, but worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Worldwide means that we can learn from each other not only within the Western world, but also in exchange with cultures and countries of the so-called “Global South”.<sup>2</sup> *Movetia* is thus taking a first concrete step in the endeavour to seek new forms of contact, respect and fair exchange, after the long history of European domination over such countries. We are probably only at the beginning; despite old wounds, anger and feelings of guilt, we still need to find a dialogue and take a stand against the exploitation and injustice that is constantly being practised anew, to give up what we are accustomed to. And where else should this start than in the education sector?

If a state-funded Swiss agency is now opening up a new, broad horizon for stakeholders in all areas of education—from school education to vocational education and training, adult education and youth work to higher education—new experiences, new considerations and new approaches are also needed in order to do this responsibly. This brochure aims to make a small contribution in this regard. It is the result of a *Movetia*-funded pilot project entitled “Learning from Inequality”. Conducted by the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and supported by the Swiss foundation *artasfoundation*, it took place between 2020 and 2023 and focused on an exchange of lecturers and students between Swiss universities and universities in so-called “fragile regions”. The exemplary training area was art and design. An exchange between members of art colleges in Zurich, Havana, Cairo and Sukhum/i (in the internationally unrecognized state of Abkhazia) was prepared. Then the coronavirus pandemic threw everything into disarray. Only part of the planned exchange could be realized. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, we had a wide range of experiences during this pilot project. We would like to share them here in brief.

# Challenges and reasons to accept them

By extending their cooperation beyond the western world, Swiss educational institutions are called upon to deal responsibly with cultural differences, divergent educational goals, economic inequality, authoritarian political systems, censorship and surveillance and restrictive mobility and visa regimes. At the same time, there is enormously valuable and promising learning potential for all those involved here. Both are increased if the educational exchange includes the quarter of humanity that currently lives in fragile social conditions. Can institutions in fragile regions be reliable partners? To what extent is educational cooperation politically controlled there? If international exchange is a privilege in such regions, how are these privileges distributed? Do bank transfers work there, and what guarantees does Switzerland demand for the entry of students from such regions of the world? Is the Swiss university flexible enough to welcome students who may have acquired a very different professional background in their home country? And vice versa: Are there social

structures in fragile regions that ensure the safety of visiting students? What if they fall ill? Will they find support if they mainly need informal contacts to organize their daily lives? Perhaps language is not the biggest problem today, but who in such regions has experience of being a stranger and can introduce incoming students to the specific knowledge and culture of the host region?

It's easy to capitulate in the face of so many questions! At the same time, there are good reasons to accept the challenges. There is also experience in educational cooperation with non-Western countries or even fragile regions that can be built on. Firstly, a few reasons, at least as they appear from a personal and Swiss perspective:



## A whole new perspective on home

People live very differently in fragile regions than in Switzerland. Where public structures are no longer viable, human capabilities become much more immediately apparent, both positively and negatively. Being dependent on one another becomes more directly perceptible. Such a learning environment also gives students from Switzerland a new perspective on the institutions in their home country: What, for example, is the feeling of legal certainty based on? Is a pension fund an achievement? Even if it invests heavily in property? What freedoms are open to young people, and what is the relationship between money and regulation density? What is needed for good university teaching – and what is not? And of course: What is the value of our form of democracy and why do only 30–35% of 18–24 year olds vote?



## Experience yourself in a different dynamic

Many regions that are considered fragile also have a very young population. Their median age is often under 26 years (median in Switzerland: 43 years), which is clearly noticeable in the dynamics of everyday life and in the many initiatives that are emerging. Young people from Switzerland can meet people of the same age with a very different self-image and see their own position in a new light.



## Question alternatives more deeply

Fundamental orientations of Western societies, such as their resource-based relationship with nature, their individualistic and consumer-orientated focus or their security strategies, are being questioned by many people today. One might therefore quickly hope to learn from cultures that have different attitudes to such fundamental issues or have long been developing criticism of and resistance to dominant Western views. Here, the content and time frame of an in-depth educational exchange makes it possible to get to know alternative cultural traditions better and to avoid false romanticization.



## Respond to global challenges

Destruction on a global scale, which is primarily caused by affluent societies but can still be largely suppressed in them, has long been evident in fragile regions and is felt – almost by definition – with full vehemence there. How much water does a person need? How can a country take in hundreds of thousands of war or climate refugees? How can it organize civil resistance in authoritarian systems and keep access to alternative news channels open? In the face of such questions, educational exchange with fragile regions is not just about recognizing the extent of the difficulties and learning from people's coping strategies. Global cooperation and the integration of different perspectives and skills are necessary in order to respond to the challenges ahead.

## ● But how do they work together?

We urgently need new examples of fair and respectful cross-cultural cooperation beyond the old colonial patterns that still exist in some cases, beyond imperial superiority and subordination. Educational exchange between people from Switzerland and from non-Western countries or even fragile regions opens up a field for trialling forward-looking, egalitarian practices.

## ● Share resources

From a Swiss perspective, it may initially be a matter of sharing the rich material and human resources of local educational institutions with others. For students from fragile regions in particular, new professional contacts and easier access to information and materials offer valuable development opportunities. They may be overwhelmed at first, but later on they will certainly return polite thanks as well as well-founded, critical questions from unfamiliar perspectives.

## ● And last but not least: solidarity

Through educational cooperation with institutions and people in fragile regions, Swiss universities connect with those who are working to rebuild a reliable community in their regions, perhaps after a war or other disaster. People with diverse educational experience and international professional networks are then urgently needed. The bond that is expressed in such solidarity is not called “help”, but confidence and trust in the power of self-help.

# Practical organization

**Educational cooperation with partners from fragile regions requires special attention from those responsible at Swiss universities. What do they need to consider when seeking such cooperation beyond the usual mobility programmes within Switzerland and the EU? How could they proceed?**

**Here are some important points that apply specifically to reciprocal exchange programmes, but also to the unilateral reception or unilateral secondment of students or lecturers.**

## ● Finding good partners

This initially concerns partners at their own university and in their own country. The special challenges of such exchange and cooperation projects must be widely supported by the institution. Many of us have busy schedules, so a special, shared motivation is a prerequisite. It requires more work and funding. This includes special information events about possible new partner regions. The demand from students and lecturers for educational visits to “difficult” regions can be identified, as can a special interest in accompanying guests from there.

It is also very important to make contact with Swiss organizations that are constantly active in the target region and know the conditions there. These can be state institutions (e.g. embassies), certain companies, but especially non-governmental organizations.

A preparatory trip to the target region is strongly recommended for those responsible for such international cooperation programmes at universities. By accompanying the Swiss organizations active on the ground and building bridges with local

stakeholders, they will gain an insight into the current political and economic situation and any special considerations that need to be taken into account. The itinerary here will be very different from that of a tourist trip. Later, when the cooperation project is implemented, you will also want to fall back on these partner organizations. In addition, people from the target region in question – possibly even at your own university – can usually provide valuable information.

Finding partners in the destination country is part of the preparatory trip. Here, too, the accompanying organization can suggest suitable educational institutions and possible persons of trust within and outside these institutions. In some circumstances, the university with the best Internet presence and the best facilities in a region may also be the most politically monitored. Certain institutions may be reserved for particular social classes, and all options will certainly differ in the professional and practical guidance they can offer to visiting students. Since financial participation will hardly be possible in fragile regions, such concrete labour and in-kind contributions are of central importance.

In addition to the search for a partner institution, the preparatory trip is also very much about people. Where there is a lack of a functioning community, people who are considered to have integrity and are respected in the particular society are a central anchor point for the project.

After the preparatory trip, the agreements on expectations and services must be recorded in writing with the chosen educational institution. It is important that this document is formulated jointly by both parties. The fact that this is actually done together is already a first test for the cooperation.

### ● Preparations at your own university

In parallel with the formulation of the written agreement with the partner institution, the preparations at home become concrete: scheduling, provision of your own budget, the internal announcement of the programme, etc., as usual from other collaborations. In the case of educational cooperation with institutions in fragile regions, there are also special information and preparation services for students or lecturers who are interested in a guest stay in such a region, as well as extended arrangements for hosting and looking after guests from there.

### ● Selection procedure

Beyond the usual selection criteria such as language skills or professional qualifications, the selection of participants in exchange or scholarship programmes with/for fragile regions requires special attention. On the Swiss side, certain practical life skills are certainly a criterion. On the partner countryside, it cannot be ruled out that the rare and coveted opportunities to study abroad are awarded in a non-transparent manner. It is possible that calls for applications are

not publicized and that nepotism or even corruption payments influence the nomination. In addition to good knowledge of the situation and the aforementioned local persons of trust, a certain antidote is that the sending universities must propose a larger number of applicants to their partner universities and provide their documents. The host universities can then make their own selection from all these applicants.

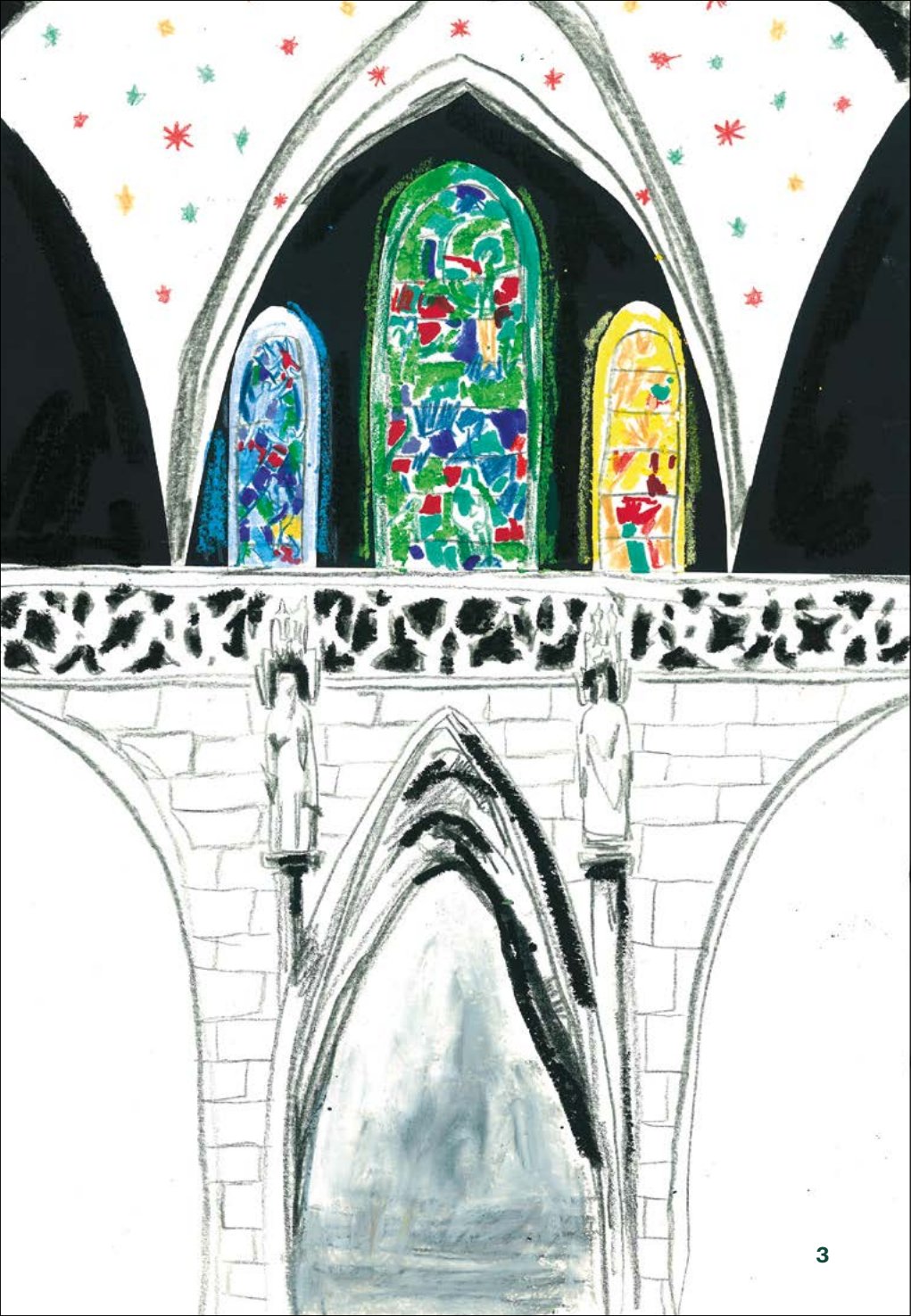
### ● Visa issues

Switzerland's entry and residence regulations pose a major challenge for educational cooperation with fragile regions, usually much more so than the regulations of those countries to which Swiss students wish to travel. The most important thing to note here is that visa procedures take a long time and must be initiated several months in advance. Visa applicants must compile extensive dossiers for their applications, have documents translated and notarized, and provide an insight into their financial situation. In addition to a letter of invitation, confirmation of financial guarantees and accident and health insurance from the inviting institution is often required. In most cases, a valid ticket for arrival and departure must be presented before it is even clear whether the visa will be granted.

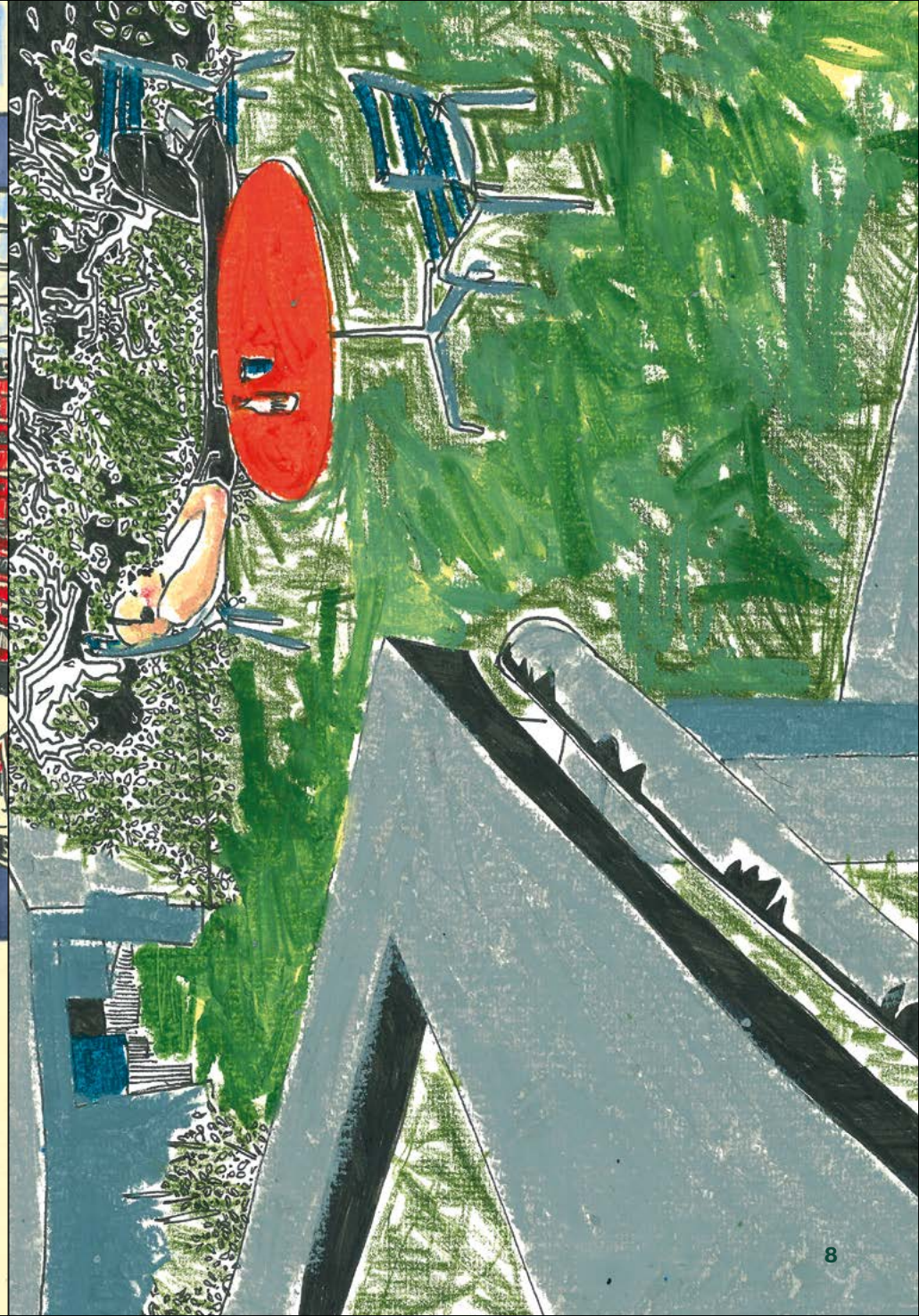
It should also be noted that visa applications usually require a personal appearance at an embassy or consulate. Not all embassies have their own consular department, which is why applicants may have to factor in time and money for their own journey or even a trip abroad.

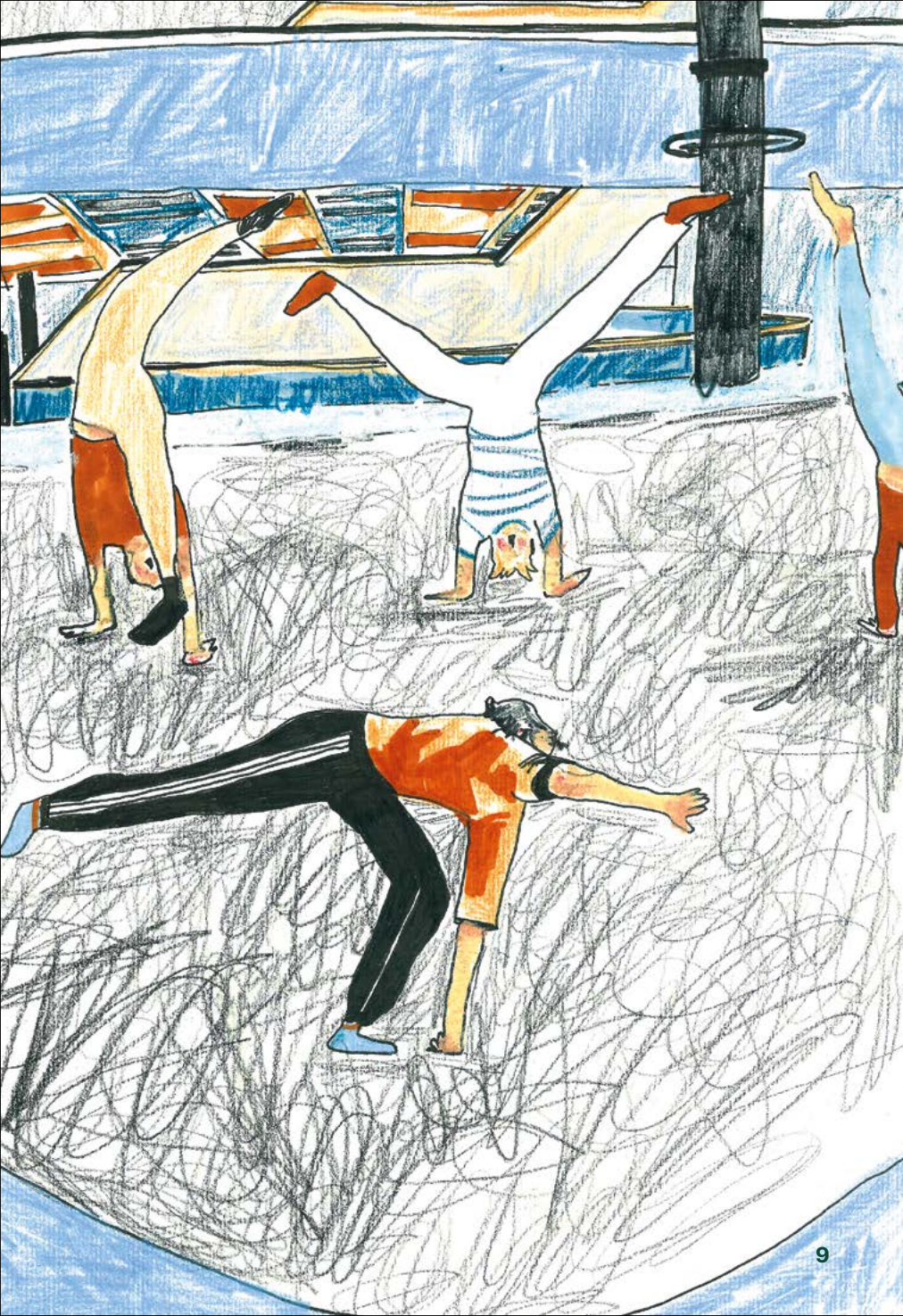
Many countries issue their own education visas free of charge and embassy staff are usually very helpful with university enquiries. Anyone who has already established contact with an embassy during a preparatory trip and has provided information about the project has a decisive advantage.













## The safety of travellers

Alongside sensible caution on the part of the travellers themselves, the best insurance in fragile regions is the care of the locals, i.e. embedding travellers in the protection of the local host community. This has proven its worth many times over. In addition, the usual precautions such as reserve money, membership of an air rescue organization and repatriation insurance should also be taken.

Constant monitoring of the current political situation in the destination country is essential not only before departure, but also during the stay. Current travel advice from embassies provides initial indications and in some universities also forms the basis for giving permission to travel. Nevertheless, they only provide rough guidelines and should definitely be supplemented by discussions with the persons of trust identified during the preparatory trip (including embassy staff).

## Unequal financial opportunities

In educational cooperation between institutions in Switzerland and in fragile regions, significant differences in financial resources and economic scope must be expected at both personal and institutional level. As a rough guide, it can be said that everyday goods cost 6 to 10 times more in Switzerland<sup>5</sup> and net incomes in Switzerland are 20 to 40 times higher than in "poor" countries<sup>6</sup>. To finance an international flight, it may take 3 to 5 months' wages there.

Unlike exchange programmes within Europe, Swiss universities must therefore be willing and able to cover the costs of travel, accommodation and living expenses (including mobility) for guests from fragile regions. This will also have to be taken into account for Movetia programmes. In contrast, experience has shown that universities

in fragile regions can at least cover benefits in kind such as accommodation, language courses or certain mobility costs for students from Switzerland.

The unequal economic conditions not only play a role in terms of financing, but – and this is often even more difficult – they have a greater or lesser impact on all interpersonal encounters. Thus, the globally unequal (economic) power balance continues in personal power relations between economic freedom of choice and economic dependency. Counteracting this at a human level is one of the major tasks of international cooperation. It appears on a daily basis in questions of giving and receiving, of not being ashamed, of generosity, of recognizing non-monetary values or of sharing one's own non-monetary neediness. Helping to subvert global disparities on a small scale is a joint task for both sides in educational co-operation.

## Political control and censorship

The pressure on the community in a fragile region is often associated with an increase in authoritarian political structures. The less they can legitimize themselves, the more they control people by isolating them, monitoring them and trying to control them through censorship and propaganda. Taking initiative and freely expressing one's own opinion is then dangerous. People in Cuba, Syria, Myanmar, Venezuela, Yemen or Afghanistan, and in regions of Ethiopia, Egypt or Lebanon (to name but a few), have had to develop a clear awareness of their freedoms and limits. The resulting restraint with regard to political issues must also be respected when they come to Swiss universities as visiting students. It is always to be expected that they will be under observation or scrutiny on their return.

Swiss guest students should also exercise caution in authoritarian countries. Knowledge of the political situation is an important part of the preparation for the

stay. This includes knowledge of the possible politicization of gender identities outside of heteronormativity. It is also necessary to sensitize people to any specific practices in the surveillance that is now observed globally. People with experience in dealing with secret service surveillance recommend not to hide one's opinion; one should act transparently but without seeking great publicity when expressing this opinion.

### ● Duration of stay for visiting students

Both for reciprocal exchange programmes and in the case of unilateral reception or secondment of students, a stay of one semester has proven to be appropriate at BA level. This also appears to make sense for educational cooperation with institutions in fragile regions, although it is advisable to arrive approximately one month before the start of the semester due to the longer orientation period that may be required. A stay of one month should be the minimum for a guest visit by lecturers from or in fragile regions.

### ● Reflection and evaluation

Precisely because the global horizon in educational exchange and cooperation with institutions in fragile regions is relatively new, it is very valuable to hold evaluation discussions with all those involved from your own and the partner university at the end of each stay. The organization that initially helped to open doors in the foreign context should also be involved.

In addition to institutional learning, supporting students in their personal reflection on their study visit to a fragile region is particularly important. The return from such a region is often more difficult than the stay there. Universities are predestined to provide a framework for such reflection that enables friendly exchange between students and joint learning.

Dagmar Reichert  
*artasfoundation*

## A mobility project of ZHdK

Thanks to the generous support of the *Movetia* agency, the Learning from Inequality project was able to realize an educational exchange and specific mobility activities with partner institutions in Sukhum/i<sup>7</sup> (in Abkhazia, which has de facto seceded from Georgia) and Havana (Cuba). Compared to Switzerland, both regions have completely different and currently very difficult framework conditions. The aim was to gain concrete experience in working with partners from fragile regions and to learn the special attention required for this, as well as to test forms of cooperation based on solidarity and mutual respect beyond colonial patterns. The prerequisite was that ZHdK was able to cover all costs, as it is unthinkable that students and lecturers from such regions could afford a stay in Zurich. In 2020, three students from Sukhum/i and Havana and one ZHdK student received a scholarship to complete part of their studies in Fine Arts, Art Education and Contemporary Dance at ZHdK and in Cuba. In 2023, eleven lecturers and students were invited on a study trip to Switzerland. They were given an insight into teaching and exchanged ideas with members of ZHdK. All participants

found the experience, the encounters and what they learned very valuable, despite the sometimes difficult circumstances. At the same time, we at ZHdK benefited enormously from the many years of experience and high level of expertise of artasfoundation, with whom we jointly carried out the project, and learnt basic procedures for such cooperation activities. The activities led to many new insights, critical reflection on our own situation and, last but not least, many warm encounters. The COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine made the realization of the project much more difficult. The planned activities with the partner institution in Egypt and the lecturer mobility from Switzerland to Sukhum/i and Havana had to be cancelled completely as it was no longer possible to travel to these countries. Nevertheless, many insights were gained into what is possible in such unequal situations on the one hand, but also what constitutes insurmountable obstacles on the other. Some of these experiences are summarized in this brochure. There is great hope that Switzerland will continue to offer funding opportunities for projects and mobility cooperation with partner institutions from very unequal backgrounds in the future and that we will be able to continue this work.

## Footnotes

- 1 <http://www3.compareyourcountry.org/states-of-fragility>
- 2 See, for example, the UNESCO study "Understanding education's role in fragility". <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000191504>.
- 3 See: <https://movetia.ch/en/magazine/mobility-is-now-opening-up-to-the-whole-world> (17.2.2024)
- 4 The terms "Global South" and "Global North" are not unproblematic, as they encompass a great heterogeneity of conditions. In any case, the terms are not meant geographically, but serve to differentiate between countries, regions or social classes (in all countries) that do not have the economic strength, political and military power and cultural/media influence to assert their interests and needs.
- 5 Source of the estimate, e.g. [https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings\\_current.jsp](https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings_current.jsp)
- 6 Source of the estimate, e.g. <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/global-economy/countries-ranked-average-monthly-salary-after-tax-662438>
- 7 The use of designations and names, particularly with regard to the conflict regions, should not be interpreted as recognition or non-recognition. They have no political connotations in this context.

## Drawings

The illustrations on the cover and in the booklet are by Diana Narmaniia and Danakai Adleiba. Both are art students from the city of Sukhum/i in the South Caucasus. The drawings on their sketch pads were created during their stay in Zurich as part of a *Movetia* exchange project at ZHdK.

Cover fig.:

Diana Narmaniia, "ZHdK Library / Zurich, Lindenhof"

Fig. 1:

Danakai Adleiba, "Zurich, Niederdorf"

Fig. 2:

Diana Narmaniia, "At the airport"

Fig. 3:

Diana Narmaniia, "In the Fraumünster church in Zurich"

Fig. 4:

Danakai Adleiba, "Interior, Zurich"

Fig. 5:

Danakai Adleiba, "District 5, Zurich"

Fig. 6:

Danakai Adleiba, "Too much info?"

Fig. 7:

Diana Narmaniia, "ZHdK workspace"

Fig. 8:

Diana Narmaniia, "Terrace of ZHdK"

Fig. 9:

Diana Narmaniia, "Ballet training at ZHdK"

Fig. 10:

Diana Narmaniia, "Foyer at ZHdK"

Fig. 11:

Danakai Adleiba, "On the train"

Fig. page 12:

Danakai Adleiba, "Sechseläuten at the Lindenhof with the guest canton of Schwyz"

Apart from working with these great artists, I also made really good friends in Havana. I experienced a lot of human warmth. Now I have a family in Cuba, and I really want to find ways to work with them again and reciprocate the hospitality and care I received.

Lida, exchange student from Zurich

However, working in different parts of the world also brings with it many difficulties: adapting to new circumstances, respecting and accepting other mentalities and cultures, constant self-criticism and socio-political considerations. I strongly recommend that all students venture into such new experiences.

Lida, exchange student from Zurich

I am aware of the profound impact that some of the lectures and classes I have attended have had on me and my artistic practice, and the doors that have opened for me recently thanks to these opportunities.

Talia, exchange student from Havana

This experience has changed me a lot, and I needed that. I am super happy and am now so clear in my head about my next steps in life.

Jan Set, exchange student from Suchum/i

I see my stay in Zurich as a valuable investment for my career and for me as a person.

Sofiia, exchange student from Ukraine and Leipzig

My stay in Switzerland brought me a lot professionally. It also made me realize how art can connect people all over the world.

Saleema, exchange student from Sukhum/i

On a woodworking course, I observed a young woman sawing something with a heavy chainsaw, breaking all the stereotypes. Who says that only men do this kind of work?

Astanda, lecturer from Suchum/i

You definitely need a certain amount of prior knowledge or understanding before travelling away from home. Sometimes you can't expect a romantic experience and you have to be prepared for that.

Talia, exchange student from Havana

## Imprint

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The views expressed in the texts are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of these institutions

Further information on the Centre for Art and Peacebuilding  
[www.zhdk.ch/en/international/center-for-art-and-peacebuilding-cap-8313](http://www.zhdk.ch/en/international/center-for-art-and-peacebuilding-cap-8313)

*artasfoundation*  
[www.artasfoundation.ch/en](http://www.artasfoundation.ch/en)

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