

## The Iceberg Model of Culture

One of the most well-known models of culture is the iceberg. Its main focus is on the elements that make up culture, and on the fact, that some of these elements are very visible, whereas others are hard to discover.

The idea behind this model is that culture can be pictured as an iceberg: only a very small portion of the iceberg can be seen above the water line. This top of the iceberg is supported by the much larger part of the iceberg, underneath the water line and therefore invisible. Nonetheless, this lower part of the iceberg is the powerful foundation.

Also in culture, there are some visible parts: architecture, art, cooking, music, language, just to name a few. But the powerful foundations of culture are more difficult to spot: the history of the group of people that hold the culture, their norms, values, basic assumptions about space, nature, time, etc. The iceberg model implies that the visible parts of culture are just expressions of its invisible parts. It also points out, how difficult it is at times to understand people with different cultural backgrounds – because we may spot the visible parts of “their iceberg”, but we cannot immediately see what are the foundations that these parts rest upon.

On the other hand, the iceberg model leaves a number of the questions raised above unanswered. Most of the time, it is used as a starting point for a more in-depth look at culture, a first visualization of why sometimes it is so difficult to understand and “see” culture.

### ***Relevance for youth work***

*The iceberg model focuses our attention on the hidden aspects of culture. It is a reminder that in intercultural encounters, similarities we might find at first sight turn out to be based on completely different assumptions about reality. Among young people, cultural differences may sometimes not be so obvious to perceive: across borders young people like jeans, listen to pop music and need to access their e-mails. Learning interculturally then means to become firstly aware of the lower part of one's own iceberg, and to be able to talk about it with others in order to understand each other better and find common grounds.*

