

# WORKING TOGETHER ACROSS CULTURES IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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*This article is based on some of the wisdom derived from our learning and reflection from teaching intercultural communications and building intercultural capacity in non-profit and community organizations both internationally and in Canada. We would like to hear your comments and feedback at [info@hille-magassa.com](mailto:info@hille-magassa.com). We would also appreciate if you can acknowledge Hille-Magassa & Associates when citing this article. Thank you.*

When we work in the international development field, we are inevitably put in touch with people from other cultures. We need to communicate, connect and understand each other, work together in partnerships over long distances, and hopefully also visit each other from time to time. The practical reality of working in the context of global development can be an invaluable learning experience that raises our cultural awareness. This opportunity can be very enriching on a personal level, but it can also lead to some misunderstanding and frustration. In this article on intercultural awareness we hope to highlight how all of us can develop greater cultural understanding, sometimes called *Cultural Intelligence*.

Most of us have heard of the concepts called the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), that measures the capacity to think, and Emotional Intelligence that helps people understand how they handle their emotions. Cultural Intelligence focuses on the capacity to interact effectively across cultures.<sup>2</sup>

## **What Is Culture?**

Culture has many meanings that are constantly being refined. For this article we define culture as the distinct national and ethnic ways that people living in different parts of the

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<sup>1</sup> Content extracted from intercultural workshops developed by Hille-Magassa & Associates. [www.hille-magassa.com](http://www.hille-magassa.com)

<sup>2</sup> David C. Thomas and Kerr Inkson, 2009 *Cultural Intelligence, Living and Working Globally*, Second Edition. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco

world classify and represent their experiences, beliefs and behaviours and act creatively. The Latin word *inter-* means *between*, so *inter-cultural* means between cultures. Within a space defined as inter-cultural then, the culturally different actors have to transcend their personal cultural perspectives and meet each other within a newly agreed upon space.

Successful interaction across cultures requires a high degree of awareness of one's own culture. This is a common cultural blind spot that usually leads people to misunderstand each other because they don't see how their culture affects their opinions, choices and actions. We are all so immersed in our own culture that we may not see how our own values, assumptions and world-views inform our behaviour, and how this behaviour in turn affects the relationships we have with our development partners, neighbours or colleagues in any cultural interaction.

Contrary to the traditional understanding of effective cultural interaction, cultural intelligence is not only learning about and adopting the outer behaviours of the culture or country you are visiting. Examples of these are, learning whether to shake hands or bow, take your shoes off when you enter the house, cover your head or shoulders, or give greater respect to seniority and age. Cultural indicators are not limited to language, dress, food, artistic expression, ceremonies and festivals. These visible aspects of culture are the tip of the cultural iceberg. The most powerful cultural elements guiding our behaviour lie under the surface. These subtler cultural elements come from our cultural and personal world-views, values and identities.

World-view is the ensemble of ideological parameters that help us make sense of the world in order to interact with others<sup>3</sup>. These parameters are defined by ideas, beliefs, traditions and experiences.

Our values, both personal<sup>4</sup> and social, are the weight we give to the ideas and beliefs created by our world-views. These values<sup>5</sup> can be positive or negative and they inform our belief about what is good or bad, right or wrong. We may apply a different value to intercultural communication in *low-context* and *high-context* cultures<sup>6</sup>. In low-context

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<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worldview>

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, J & M, 1999, *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, p. 60 Sage Publications, Inc; 3rd Edition

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Charles, 1991, p.25 *The Ethics of Authenticity*. p. 25, CBC Radio's Idea series

<sup>6</sup> Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday

societies, it is believed that people need a lot of information, such as explicit messages and direct communication in order to convince others of the validity of their own views. People from individualistic cultures, such as Western societies, most often use low-context communication styles. At the opposite end we have the high-context communication, which is often the style of people from the southern hemisphere (Africa, Asia, Latin America). In a high-context society, communication is indirect and often delivered through non-verbal coding or implied messages.

Our identities<sup>7</sup> are our understanding of who we are, who other people are, and, in turn, other people's understanding of themselves and others. In a *collective* society the group is more important than the individual and unity and harmony are more highly valued than the needs of the individual. In an *individualistic* society people are more self-oriented and individual autonomy is valued more highly in relationship to the needs of the group.

Differing cultural lenses shape the following aspects of life<sup>8</sup>:

- How we handle emotions—do we express them or hide them?
- Non-verbal communication or body language—touching people, distance between people when talking, eye contact, tone of voice, etc.
- Attitudes toward seeking help versus independence and autonomy.
- Approaches to decision-making—who makes decisions and how much information does that person or group need before they can decide?
- Perceptions of individual identity—in a hierarchical society individual identity can be determined by power structures, ageism and gender<sup>9</sup>.
- Definitions of family—who is included or excluded in the definition of family?
- Gender roles—is someone's status and behaviour determined by whether the person is a man or a woman?

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, Richard, 1996 *Social Identity*. Routledge. London

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Bea Wehrly (1990), *Pathways to Multicultural Counseling Competence: A Developmental Journey*. Wadsworth Publishing

<sup>9</sup> *Gender* refers to the social roles, responsibilities, and behaviours that are believed to belong to men and women

- Feelings and views about life, death, and illness.
- Meaning of friendship and obligations related to friendship.
- Attitudes toward work and activity—what is considered work? How much effort should I make to achieve a goal and how much of my success or failure is fate?
- Perspectives on the natural world—do people respect the environment or try to dominate it?
- Perspectives on time—is it important to be on time or not?

## **Issues of Culture**

### **Human Rights and Cultural Traditions**

Many development practitioners struggle with the issue of their beliefs in the universality of human rights being challenged by the realities of the local culture and traditions. For example, some of us have been grappling with the question of what to do when a culture denies basic human rights to some of its members: the right to education for all, both girls and boys; the right of women to access economic resources and land ownership; the right to a fair trial and so on. Can we let a cultural tradition prevail over universal human rights and passively give up on the global controversy of whether human rights are a universal value or determined by culture? The *cultural relativist* argument, for example claims that human rights, far from being universal, vary according to different cultural perspectives. Some proponents of this argument hide behind the convoluted language of the UN itself, for example when later declarations and resolutions refer to group and cultural rights. Another issue is the reference to the responsibility given to of states to respect, protect and promote human rights. The UN language is confusing regarding state sovereignty and the state as responsible to uphold and promote human rights. A state in violation of the overall human rights to some or all of it citizens doesn't lose its sovereignty. However, we know that the issue of sovereignty (today mixed with the discourse of national security and terrorism) has left the door open for many states to overtly violate human rights in the name of their cultural or regional particularities<sup>10</sup>. In summary, the cultural relativist argument is a

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

serious threat to the very essence of human rights. Actors in every regions of the world are using it openly to legitimize human rights abuses and discrimination. One vivid example of this is currently taking place in Zimbabwe where homophobic legislations and practices are being justified on the basis of *cultural particularities* of a certain group of people who happens to be in power. The question then for some development practitioners, is how can we argue that homophobia is not part of the whole Zimbabwean culture, but just part of the culture of those who write policy and apply the law. Can this argument even change the situation, especially when these very rulers and law makers have been given legitimacy in the declaration as the ones to upheld, promote and protect human rights?

It is difficult to resolve the conflict that arises between human rights and culture through intellectual debate: not all cultural practices should prevail or be respected. This is why using a rights-based approach to development that first promotes human rights for all, social justice and inclusion is important if we want long-term social change.

### **Barriers to Cultural Understanding**

As mentioned, successful intercultural relations depend on one's capacity to transcend one's own culture. An inability to do this often results in stereotyping of the other. The negative outcomes are that people make assumptions (*everyone should be on time*), create stereotypes (*illiterate people are stupid*) and objectify others (into *them* and *us*). Outward signs of discrimination may be easy to recognize. More difficult are the subtle forms such as paternalistic behaviour (*Let me help you because you are unable, or You need what I am offering because my culture is more advanced than yours*) and dependency or *clientalism* (*You owe me because you are rich and I am poor*).

### **Maintaining a Spirit of Openness and Learning**

No one and no culture are ever fully *developed* because this is a continuous and evolving process. There is a development methodology called Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which has as its base the belief that the outsider comes into a cultural context aware that they know nothing about the new situation in which they find themselves. The key to success then is to maintain a spirit of openness and remain attentive to what is going on in order to learn, and at the same time respect the knowledge of the indigenous culture. Once there is some basic understanding, it may be easier to see how the knowledge and experiences from one culture can assist to solve the problems that have been identified in another.

## **Common Intercultural Challenges**

The basis of good intercultural communications and understanding is then an investment of time and energy into our relationships between people of differing cultures. We need to develop respect, caring and trust at a deep level on both sides of the partnership. This paves the way to learn from and understand each other, and it can form the foundation for overcoming the problems that inevitably arise as we work together. Here are some common problems people have encountered when working across cultures.

**Miscommunication:** There are many causes of miscommunication. It stems from lack of understanding and a lack of awareness of our own and each other's world-views and values. Language can also be a problem. Even when we speak the same language, our interpretation of what is being said may be different. Differing hierarchical structures may also determine whether people have the ability to communicate and express opinions freely. For example in some cultures a young person cannot speak up to an older person, or women cannot speak up publically to men.

Actions: Learn to listen, understand and trust the other. Don't assume that your communication is always clear and understood by everyone. Sometime, you really need to pause and ask for feedback. The best way to do this is to check if your listener has heard you and understood what you mean. Try to do the same: summarize what you have heard and then ask the other person to correct you if you have misunderstood them.

**Capacity building:** As mentioned, we are constantly learning from our work in development and development is a two-way street. Our work contributes to everyone's inner and outer capacity to evolve as human beings. Methods of educating and styles of learning have traditions too, and we learn in different ways that reflect our culture. Out of respect for you, your project partners may be passive receivers of your information and feel unable to engage you in dialogue as an equal. Does a southern partner feel free to explain to their northern partner why one of their ideas may not work in the context of their practices and cultural realities?

Actions: Use participatory processes to build capacity, respect indigenous knowledge and be prepared to be a constant learner. One way to do this is to ask people how they have dealt with similar situations in the past. Find out the local traditions for learning— for example, is literacy common and widely used or is this a culture with a strong oral

tradition?

**Power imbalance:** Northern Civil Society Organisations (CSO) need to be careful of being flattered by the elevation that someone from a project may bestow on them when they visit. This may be because the CSO is a source of funding. If you are the organization bringing gifts, do your partners feel able to change the terms of the gift or even refuse to accept it? As the project receiving financial and other support, are you able to explain when a contribution is not appropriate in terms of what you want to achieve?

Actions: Help each other develop a respectful and equal partnership. In many cultures, while money is important to meet the material needs in life, human relationships are often the most valuable commodity and this needs to be honoured.

**The legacies of colonial history:** Most of the countries in the southern hemisphere are still dealing with the legacies of colonization and its aftermath. Don't assume that the impact of these experiences is over for the people you are working with. A Westerner can indirectly benefit from a post-colonial aura, which has nothing to do with their intrinsic expertise, actions or beliefs. The colonial legacy can be either a positive or a negative experience for anyone involved in an inter-cultural partnership.

Actions: Learn about the history of a place from the people you work with and remain aware of behaviour that may stem from prejudice and past hurts. This may include unconscious behaviour on the part of former colonizers, and reactions against visitors from former colonizing countries.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** Mutual respect across cultures is required from both sides of a partnership. Donor agencies often require stringent standards of monitoring and evaluation from the CSO they support and that may seem alien to a project team on the ground. An evaluation can be an important tool but its purpose is often misunderstood. Evaluations can help assess whether goals are being met and identify important capacity-building needs. Project leaders and CSOs alike can learn how to improve their practice and increase their ability to obtain financial support. Learning from an evaluation, a project can achieve better development results for the communities they work with, especially if the evaluation includes the views of the community receiving services.

Actions: Agree on the purpose of an evaluation before conducting one. Negotiate agreements on how to work together and link monitoring and evaluation results to capacity

building on both sides of the partnership. CSOs can improve their practices by also being evaluated by their field partner.

### **Conclusion**

It is valuable for all the players in any international partnership to reflect from time to time on the cultural values and perceptions that they bring to their work. What do we expect from those we work with overseas and how much are these expectations informed by our respective cultures? Are these expectations realistic in the eyes of our partners? Are our cultural practices blocking our progress as development actors?

Practicing Cultural Intelligence builds better international partnerships and development results because. Developing our Cultural Intelligence skills can assist us to strive for and achieve common goals, maintain sensitivity, develop good communications skills, and build trust and respect for each other.