



# Intercultural Communication: a foundation to acceptance

*Eric Jean and Christine Persaud*

## Introduction

**NGOs work in relatively precarious security situations with populations and local communities living in different cultural contexts. In some situations, organisations carry out their missions in locations where host populations have had little to no contact with individuals belonging to other cultural groups or coming from outside the area of operations (internationally, regionally or from different parts of the same country).<sup>1</sup>**

Moreover, local, national and international humanitarian and development workers each have their own cultural identities and must develop sound professional and interpersonal relationships to implement effective acceptance strategies. These include relationships:

1. between themselves within the same organisation (internal cultural context); and
2. with affected populations and all local and international stakeholders in order to carry out their programs and projects (external cultural contexts).

Cultural differences can result in misunderstandings, misinterpretations and negative perceptions on both sides during intercultural encounters. These situations can create security risks and prevent NGOs from developing respectful relationships and cultivating and maintaining consent from affected communities, local authorities, belligerents, and other stakeholders.

Risks related to cultural differences can create additional security risks at three levels:

### 1. Individual risk

psychological fatigue, emotional disturbance, culture shock, isolation, disorientation, physical and psychological violence, etc.

### 2. Operational risk

convoy attack, delay of activities/programs, failure to achieve objectives, non-access to the work zone/areas, employees becoming demotivated and resigning

### 3. Institutional / organisational risk

reputational risk including the loss of external and internal credibility, loss of funding and partnership agreement, loss of institutional agreement with the host government and/or armed opposition groups

Intercultural communication skills reduce risks associated with cultural differences and facilitate the creation of an environment of trust and security for encounters between individuals and groups from different cultural contexts. Those skills are essential to achieve acceptance. This article argues that NGOs will be able to better develop acceptance strategies in a thoughtful, articulate and sustainable manner by improving their skills to create lasting links with individuals and groups from different cultural contexts.

In this article, we present key concepts of intercultural communication before examining the risks associated with cultural differences between NGOs and local stakeholders, informed by an external cultural context analysis. We subsequently discuss the preponderant role that local and national staff play to support the cultural adaptation of their organisations. Finally, we suggest capacity-building activities in intercultural communication to promote a lasting change in the organisational culture of NGOs.

Based on our own field experiences and following numerous discussions with participants as part of our security risk management (SRM) training, we find that problems resulting from cultural

<sup>1</sup> Certain missions – in particular in Afghanistan-Iran, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, and Pakistan – were revealing on this subject for Eric Jean, one of the authors of this article.

differences between NGOs and local populations and stakeholders are not managed uniformly by the organisations but instead depend on the will and capacities of employees without clear guidelines. The causes are multiple: personal initiatives to varying degrees; lack of time due to an emergency mission; lack of tools and knowledge to manage cultural differences; or lack of sensitivity to them. We believe that cultural factors should be treated systematically in order to reduce the risk of non-acceptance for NGOs in the field.

## Definitions and key concepts of intercultural communication

There are several definitions of culture, communication, and intercultural communication. We present a few definitions and key elements of those necessary for the understanding of our article. 'Culture' does not refer to individuals but only to groups of persons. For individuals, we will talk about a cultural identity forged by his/her experience from different cultural groups. 'Culture' refers to what is common, valued (positively and negatively) and expressed (especially through behaviour) in all its forms within a group of individuals on a day-to-day basis. It can be defined in many ways and not just in terms of common language, ethnicity, or nationality. Essentially, culture is 'the coordination of meaning and action within a human context' (Bennett, 2021).

The culture of most humanitarian or development mandated NGOs should be predicated by values such as: dignity of affected communities and employees; respect of physical and psychological integrity; gender equality; respect for local customs, etc. The expression of an NGO's culture is mainly done through their programs and activities, which must be based on the nine commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard. It is also expressed through their communication and identity (faith-based or secular, etc). When it comes to communication, one should not only think in terms of language but in terms of the process by which one wants to be understood by another person or group. The process can take place both verbally and non-verbally.

Intercultural communication takes place between two (cross-cultural) or more (multicultural) cultural contexts, either at the level of individuals or groups (organisations, ethnic groups, nations, etc.). It can be defined as 'the mutual creation of meaning and coordination of action across cultural contexts'

(Bennett, 2021). Intercultural communication is integral to an acceptance strategy, as it refers to the communications that occur between an NGO and affected communities, local authorities, belligerents and other stakeholders. Creating a common meaning, with all parties involved, of 'what', 'why', 'when', and 'how' the programs and activities of the NGO will take place in the field and will support the establishment of a climate of trust and security – essential elements of acceptance.

In order to have an effective intercultural communication process with all parties involved, NGOs have to develop their contextual cultural knowledge. To do so effectively they first have to understand their own internal organisational culture prior to performing a cultural context assessment of the population living on the territory of their operations. After these stages, NGOs will be able to adopt strategies to reduce the risk resulting from cultural differences between themselves and all parties involved, and thereby maintain acceptance.

## Analysing the risks related to cultural differences between NGOs and stakeholders

The cultural assessment of the external context should identify the key factors and trends (generalisations) observed among local populations which could create risks to employees, programs, or activities of NGOs in the field (ISO, 2009). To initiate this analysis, we propose a list of four observational categories developed by the work of intercultural communication experts to perceive cultural differences, interactions, and misunderstandings. These categories are inspired by the external observable categories which lay the groundwork for analysing cultural differences (Bennett, 2021).

The four observational categories we propose – which can be refined according to the NGOs' programmes – are as follows:

- 1. The use of languages in the context of formal communication** – such as the usual greetings when starting and ending a meeting, negotiations, arguments, criticisms, compliments, congratulations, and apologies
- 2. Non-verbal communication** – i.e., the use of tone of voice, eye contact, body signals (gestures of the head, arms and legs), and body distance between interlocutors

### 3. Communication styles

### 4. Cultural values and beliefs

In the following sections, we address the latter two categories.

#### Communication styles

There are many types of communication styles. The two overarching categories in intercultural communication refer to 'High' and 'Low' context communication. These were initially presented by Edward T. Hall (Hall, 1976), who is considered to be the founder of the intercultural communication field. These are umbrella terms under which other more specific communication styles are classified.

'High' context means that the message expressed by a person cannot be taken on its verbal face-value alone. Words alone do not carry the full meaning of the message expressed by an individual; the message needs to be analysed, taking into account the overall context in which it is transmitted. This could include the social status of the speaker, the location (office, cafes, etc.), their attitude, or the relationship with their interlocutor. 'Low' context means the words used take on their full meaning and importance regardless of the overall context or the circumstances under which they were spoken (official or informal meeting, in person, on the phone, etc.). The High and Low context analysis should be performed on a continuum scale, rather than in strict terms of one type or the other.

After this first stage the analysis of more specific communication styles can be done, such as:

- Linear / circular – are discussion items presented step by step in a logical (linear) way, or presented in a seemingly random order, often without actually naming the main topic directly (circular)
- Direct / indirect – are issues addressed head-on and put directly to the person concerned, or are topics addressed implicitly by suggesting examples or metaphors, or requesting the intervention of a third party in case of conflict resolution
- Relational / task-oriented – determines whether interpersonal relationships are privileged in the context of work or if they remain exclusively work-oriented.
- Confrontational / non-confrontational – distinguishes the degree of emotional expressiveness when disputes are resolved, matching well with direct and indirect styles.

#### Cultural values and beliefs

NGOs should identify what is valued positively and what is valued negatively among the population of the area and/or country of operations (for example, collective actions and solidarity vs individuality; equality of men and women or not; respect of national authorities; freedom of speech vs restrictions; taboo subjects; the treatment of foreigners; etc.). It is also key to understand the population's religion and spiritual beliefs, how they put them into practice, and the opinion of the population about NGOs 'occupying' their territory. With these observations, it is possible to identify the elements likely to create negative perceptions and misunderstandings between representatives of an NGO and local stakeholders.

When analysing risk, security risk managers tend to identify the main threats and their vulnerabilities in order to reduce those risk to an acceptable level. During this same context analysis, we invite readers to identify the cultural elements in common, either between the cultural context of the population of the country/region of the mission and the NGO. These elements will be the starting point for the development of 'intercultural bridges' between the NGO and stakeholders where the contribution of national and local staff and local partners will be essential (see the section below *'The role of local and national employees and local implementing partners'*).

According to our experience in the field, cultural values and beliefs, communication styles, and non-verbal communication are the three most important categories to begin the assessment. In examining both their internal cultural context and that of the external parties they are working with, an NGO can better identify obstacles to acceptance for the realisation of their programs and field activities.

As said previously, it is essential for NGOs to clearly define their internal organisational culture in order to be able to identify the cultural differences. The raw risk of losing acceptance (Threats X Vulnerabilities) is the result of a) the cultural differences between the NGO and local groups (affected communities, authorities, and other stakeholders) experienced during b) the execution of the programs and field activities. The more cultural differences are significant, the higher the probability of misunderstanding. This risk can be mitigated by improving intercultural communication skills to better manage cultural differences (net risk). Thus, NGOs will further reduce the individual, operational

and organisational/institutional risks presented at the beginning of the article, such as NGOs' image and credibility.

It is important to highlight that cultural differences can be opportunities as well as threats. However, as the purpose of this article is to discuss the potential risks related to cultural differences, we can therefore illustrate this reasoning in the formula below:

Other factors can prevent NGOs from being accepted in their mission territory (inadequate funding, lack of technical and operational capacities, etc.). But, as indicated in our title, we believe that managing cultural differences through intercultural communication skills is central to the success of the acceptance strategy. In their process of developing intercultural communication skills, NGOs should include public communication activities aimed at the general population to explain their values, mission, objectives and the reasons for their presence in

the field. NGOs often take for granted that their organisation is known to everyone. According to the experience of the authors, even after several months in the field, it is possible that the population still ignore why a certain NGO operates in their territory. This situation can lead to rumours and negative perceptions that may affect an NGO's acceptance.

We invite readers to take a few minutes to reflect as they re-read the definition of acceptance and compare it to the risk formula presented. They will probably find that the formula correctly identifies the cause of many armed conflicts and disputes and exclusion of cultural groups in our societies.

Using the example of cultural differences in communication styles, we illustrate the analysis of the risk of losing acceptance by identifying threats, vulnerabilities and capacities more precisely in order to reduce this risk.

**Figure 1: Risk of loss of acceptance due to cultural differences**



## SCENARIO:

### Access negotiations agreements

An NGO negotiates an agreement with the local authorities for the implementation of a food distribution program. The authorities want to make sure that certain groups of the population are served first and know that the NGO needs their permission to guarantee the access and safety of its staff. The local representative is highly respected and has a high hierarchical status in the region. The local cultural communication style is oriented towards the so-called 'High context'.

During the negotiation, if the head of mission of the NGO approaches the elements of discussion head-on (direct) and takes for granted that the words spoken by the local representative must be 'taken literally', not only may the perception of the local representative towards the head of mission not be accurate – in addition, the head of mission will have a poor understanding of what the local representative will have expressed. Because the local style of communication differs from that of NGO representatives, completely different areas of communication may be emphasised.

Should the negotiations take a long time, the head of mission might lose their patience and adopt a confrontational attitude in addition to having a direct communication style with the local representative, who in turn could shut down (their style is not confrontational) making the negotiation more difficult, even longer, and possibly doomed to fail.

In this scenario, cultural differences in communication style (threat) can lead to failure of negotiation for access (vulnerability) and possibly acceptance. In return, if the NGO had developed its intercultural communication skills (capacities), it would have been able to adapt to the communication style of local individuals and would have informed and trained its head of mission according to this cultural difference to improve the probability of being accepted.

There are publications from specialised sources such as Cultural Detective and books from many authors like Hofstede and others, specialised in intercultural communications. However, aside from published studies about the specific culture of a population, the best source of information about the local culture are the individuals who are from there or live there. NGOs already have these individuals in their ranks, and collaborate with relevant experts: the local and national employees and local partners.

## The role of local and national employees and local implementing partners

***"There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign."***

Stevenson, 1886

An organisation can improve its understanding of the operational environment by consulting, listening, and learning from its local and national staff and partners. By doing this, organisations can significantly improve their acceptance and promote long-term intercultural understanding between themselves and all groups in their external environment. In addition, local/national staff and local partners are essential in the development of NGOs' organisational culture. It is essential that their role and contribution should be recognised and formalised by their employers.

In this context:

- National/local employees and partner organisations should brief 'visitors/non-local employees' about the local culture. This briefing must be formally included in the arrival program in the same way as administrative and security briefings.

The content of the briefing should be developed based on the external cultural context analysis, using information related to the four categories explained above and putting the emphasis on specific cultural issues for the NGO in their work environment such as: the programs and activities of NGOs in the field, perceptions of the population, gender roles, intersectional profiles, NGOs' reputation and credibility with



stakeholders. This briefing acts as the starting point for the 'cultural self-awareness' process of visitors/non-local employees.

In addition, this process will enable the local employees responsible for the briefings to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural identity of the visitors/non-locals, which contributes to a mutual exchange about cultural differences (diversity) within the NGO.

- According to their task and level of responsibilities, and with their free and informed consent, some of the local employees and partner organisations could be recognised as representatives, "ambassadors", and above all as intercultural translators between the culture of the given organisation and that of local groups. Their role is critical for external communications and for maintaining a climate of trust and security (essential conditions of the acceptance strategy) especially since some of them have privileged contacts with stakeholders such as affected communities, local authorities, armed group leaders, and local NGOs.

Unfortunately, these responsibilities are not always recognised for their true value nor formally considered by the leadership of an organisation, particularly when there are security issues to consider and a lack of diversity in executive management. Negotiation access is one of many examples experienced in the field; according to two studies published in 2016, more than 50% of access negotiations with non-state armed groups were carried out by national and local employees, 56% of whom had not received training (Haver & Carter, 2016).

In order to formalise the role of local staff and partners, NGOs must recognise and include communications-related responsibilities and tasks in job descriptions and in agreement with local partners. They must also reinforce the capacities of local partners and employees with means such as salaries corresponding to their real responsibilities, trainings, telephone and calling cards, representation fees/travel expenses, and in some cases, protection and relocation measures when NGOs end their missions.

From a broader, organisational perspective, and for a permanent change, all those changes will have to be initiated and supported by an NGO institutional

policy on diversity. This policy should clearly affirm the equality between all employees in order to formalise the role, contribution, and responsibilities of local employees and partners in intercultural communication and SRM-acceptance strategy in the field.

Considering their knowledge of the culture of the country/territory mission, local partners, local and national employees should be involved in strategic and operational decision-making processes in the conception, planning, and realization of the programs, field activities, and security management.

Our experience points to, notably, (Eric Jean's) missions in Afghanistan, Haiti, Pakistan, and DRC, and (Persaud's) missions in Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Great Lakes Region, Haiti, Sudan and South Sudan in which the positive contribution of local and national employees to the work of NGOs was directly linked to acceptance and security. With a reinforced integration of local employees and partners, international NGOs increase their capacity to understand and respect local and national cultural contexts. By considering the cultural differences as opportunities and advantages instead of constraints, they will improve their intercultural sensitivity. This respect will be appreciated by local stakeholders and contribute to developing a climate of trust and security, which is an essential condition for an effective relationship and for cultivating and maintaining acceptance.

## Capacity building, challenges and issues for international NGOs and the humanitarian aid sector

Many years of experience working abroad or at an international organisation's headquarters do not guarantee intercultural knowledge and/or intercultural communication skills. This statement represents a very large consensus among experts and the community of practice in intercultural communication. Capacity building activities should be implemented at all levels of the organisation and a systemic approach should be considered for the success of a change management process. Intercultural communication skills have to be professionalised and are among core competencies similar to administration, logistics, public

communication, etc. Below are sample activities an NGO can consider implementing as a means to strengthen intercultural communication skills.

These activities will improve intercultural communication skills at the individual, operational, and organisational levels in order to improve sensitivity to the local cultural context, adopt a more ethical cultural behaviour in situ, and contribute to the climate of trust and security. These, in turn, will influence positive perceptions and build better acceptance. The consequences of the success of the acceptance strategy will in turn promote employee safety, the success of programs, the internal and external credibility of the NGO, and its operational and financial partnerships.

Security is everyone’s business, and we argue that the same is true for intercultural communication skills. Implementing the activities proposed above is the responsibility of all team members, in the field and at the headquarters, and not only security managers.

## Conclusion

In this text, we have introduced our readers to the rich concept of intercultural communication from the perspective of risk management and security. This can be a means to improve the effectiveness of intercultural encounters for programs and field activities, which is a primary method for gaining and maintaining acceptance. By reducing the gap of cultural differences between NGOs and all local groups, trust and security will be easier to develop in order to maintain acceptance.

Should NGOs develop their skills in this area, they will improve their capacities to act even more positively as actors of change with their international and local stakeholders, enabling programs’ outcomes of aid and development by being more adapted to local contexts and thus promote ‘the mutual creation of meaning and coordination of action across cultural contexts’ (Bennett, 2021). Those new skills will have to be generated by organisational

Organisational intercultural communication capacity building		
Individual level	Operations level	Organisational/Institutional level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pre-deployment briefing about the external cultural context of the mission for international employees</li> <li>● Training in the relocation process for all employees</li> <li>● Training in intercultural communication (cultural self-awareness)</li> <li>● Training on the organisation’s culture (diversity of team members, and of stakeholders)</li> <li>● Intercultural experience debriefing for all employees after end of contract</li> <li>● Handover process for replacement of employees</li> <li>● Psychological support for cultural issues and differences to all employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cultural differences assessment and risk analysis</li> <li>● SOPs adapted for:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communications (external and internal)</li> <li>2. Public activities &amp; official representation</li> <li>3. Programs and projects in the field</li> <li>4. HR – job descriptions recruitment and throughout the employment cycle</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Code of conduct (ethical and moral intercultural behaviour)</li> <li>● Policy of diversity and inclusion</li> <li>● Capacity building program in intercultural communication</li> <li>● Cultural context issues in the design and outcomes of projects/programs</li> <li>● Lessons learned and building of an institutional memory for challenges and issues of intercultural communication:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Related to the external context in the countries of mission</li> <li>2. For diversity and inclusion within the organisation</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<p>Source: adapted from the training workshop ‘Risk Management of Cultural Issues for Overseas Projects, IC Capacity Building for NGOs’, Eric Jean (in collaboration with EIFID). 11th May 2021.</p>		

policies and lead by high levels of management of NGOs in order to assure the success of the change management process and gain lasting results.

As presented in our title, intercultural communication is the very basis of an acceptance strategy and is also at the basis of humanitarian work abroad considering the high number of encounters between individuals with different cultural identities. By developing their intercultural communication skills, NGOs will be able to better understand the local cultural context and thus adapt their behaviour in order to be better accepted. The intercultural communication capacities of NGOs, fundraisers, and local actors should be developed in the same way that SRM strategy was about 15–20 years ago. Collectively, NGOs must empower themselves to do their jobs even better.

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Mr. Jean carried started his humanitarian work in Afghanistan with MDM Canada in 2003. He then participated in eight missions for international medical organisations such as MSF, ALIMA and the WHO in 2014 in the Philippines. He worked as Logistics Coordinator and Country Director in Central and West Africa, the Caribbean and Asia.

From 2015 to 2020, Mr. Jean was the Director of the Risk and Security Management Capacity Building Program at OCCAH-ESG UQAM, where he led consulting work, conferences, program evaluations and training with the ministries of the Government of Quebec, universities and NGOs.



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Christine entered the humanitarian sector in 1999 working in places such as Chechnya, South Sudan, Darfur, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Middle East and Sri Lanka and more. She worked for a range of organisations that include MSF, Save the Children, CARE, UN and recently the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement in emergency response, project coordination, audio-visual production and security risk management.

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