WILDE GANZEN

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PI-DOC 2: **Cross-cultural** partnership

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PI-DOC 2: CROSS-CULTURAL PARTNERSHIP

As a director or trustee, you consider to engage the support of a Dutch Private Initiative (PI) in order to implement a priority project of a village, community, or your own organisation. It is of crucial importance to recognize that you are entering into a collaboration between people of two entirely different cultures. Problems you might encounter will be about the use of money or about deadlines. Besides cultural differences, there is also a difference in position: the Dutch PI provides for (part of) the money and your organization will be the receiver and project implementer. There might also be differences in setting priorities. Your organization, the one that implements and owns the project, is well aware that external factors may cause delays. The Dutch PI may want to work fast, in order to show results to its donors. This PI-doc can help you avoid problems arising from (culturally) different expectations and interpretations.

1. WHOSE PROJECT IS IT?

Because of the cultural differences between partners, it is crucial to first decide who owns the project. Is the project owned by the Dutch PI, because they take care of the funding? Or does the project belong to the people for whom the project is intended? A key concept in modern development cooperation is 'ownership'. In the past development projects were set-up and run by donor organizations. In real terms this resulted in a donor that directed and controlled the project and took the most important decisions. Once the donor withdrew from the project, most of these projects could no longer survive. None of the local organizations had learned to manage the project, none had the means to run it. Or even worse: the project was not even their priority.

Collaboration with a local organization means to put the ownership right from the beginning at the hands of your organization and/or the target group(s). You know best what the priorities are and you have the contacts that are needed to run the project. So, you should be the project owner and be are responsible for the implementation and continuation of the project. It is the responsibility of the Dutch PI to provide for money, to think along and when needed to provide for support. But you are the Project Owner.

2. WHAT DO THE PROJECT OWNER AND THE PI EXPECT OF THEIR COLLABORATION, AND WHAT CAN YOU OFFER TO EACH OTHER?

It is important to determine and discuss the motivations of both partners concerning the project. The relation must not be one of dependency. Discuss together what both organizations, yours and the Dutch PI, mean by collaboration on an equal basis, and how this is understood in both cultures. Right from the start, it is advisable to express your expectations regarding the collaboration with the Dutch PI. They should do this too. It is very important to have a business-like discussion with each other. This will not always be easy, since most relations are based on friendship or mutual acquaintances, or in other words: emotions. Important subjects to discuss regarding collaboration are:

- What is the mutual goal/ the shared interest?
- The interest in and motivation for the project: is this truly the priority of all stakeholders involved?
- The efforts being made: which staff, with what competences, will be available to run the project?
- The duration of the collaboration.
- Will the collaboration be based on equality or will there be a certain hierarchy?
- Who will be part of the collaboration and who will have a say?
- How will the money be collected and what are the expectations regarding the amount to be collected and the time it may take?
- Which local contributions are expected, from the government for instance, and how will local funds be mobilized?
- What are the expectations of the donors regarding the project?
- Which specific knowledge and skills will be brought into the project?
- What are the most important contacts and to which networks does the project have access?
- What about the access to material resources, services, products?
- Who does what in the various phases of the project cycle?

3. JOINTLY SETTING UP A PROJECT, MAKING A PLAN

It is not advisable to jump into action immediately after the decision of working together with the Dutch PI. Taking the time and effort to sit down and set up a project plan with clear activities is a good opportunity to strengthen the partnership and to address cultural differences.

For a first outline of a project plan, there are three steps to be taken:

A. Make an analysis of the present situation:

- What are the problems the project should address?
- Who will play a role in the project?
- Who are the beneficiaries and stakeholders in the project?
- Which local organization will be the main responsible?
- B. Formulate clear goals for the project. What does the project want to achieve? Which activities are needed and what will be their cost?
- C. Stimulate the involvement of all stakeholders in this planning process. All stakeholders should be informed about the project and have a voice in it. Cultural differences make it important to discuss how to handle the participation of the various stakeholders in this process. How do women get a voice in the project and which important leaders have to be involved? Which ceremonies have to be considered?
- D. After having agreed on the aim and the activities, it is important to assign responsibilities. What does the local partner (Project Owner) do? And what does the Dutch organization (PI) do? Who is responsible for which activities and how will they communicate?

The result of this joint planning is a project document in which everything is clearly described. During this planning process both partners have the opportunity to discover their own position and role in the project. Are the mutual expectations realistic? Are there any cultural aspects that might have a positive or negative influence on the collaboration and the implementation of the project?

4. MAKING AGREEMENTS AND LAY DOWN RESPONSIBILITIES

Very often problems between organizations arise when trying to make agreements. Making agreements is culturally sensitive and it is not always easy to really understand each other. Clear agreements can help preserve good partner relations.

For the Dutch organization (PI) it is important to put the agreement on paper. The PI works with donations from people in the Netherlands and has to be business-like. It has to be accountable to the donors for all the expenditures made by the project. In the Dutch culture this is very important and obligatory. The donors want to know exactly how much money is spent for what, and what the results of the project are.

5. HOW TO DEAL WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES DURING THE COLLABORATION?

When collaborating with a Dutch PI, cultural clashes are near-inevitable. This is not necessarily a problem. The relationship might also be enriched by it. It will only become a problem when it hampers the collaboration. How to prepare oneself and how to deal with cultural differences?

It is useful to explain to your Dutch partner certain fundamental features of your culture, and ask him to tell about what the Dutch find very important. You could also read about Dutch culture in books. However, a culture will never be caught entirely in books. People are individuals and not representatives of a culture. You communicate with people and not with a culture. The most important thing in cross-cultural communication is to be aware of the things you consider as obvious, as the truth, while for the other this might not be so.

Communication is not a linear process. It is circular. Both persons influence each other at the same time and are being influenced by their own frame of reference. To communicate with someone from another culture requires an open and reflective attitude. Both parties need to be able to listen well and be open for other values, norms, habits and behavior.

Having a reflective attitude means that you will be able to observe from a distance what is happening between you and the other (helicopter view). It means that you are able to look critically to your own role. It means that you are aware of your own frame of reference, your own cultural pair of glasses.

Language

Be aware of language differences. Discover language differences and discuss them. Each culture has its own 'language'. Basically this is a code in which people indicate their intentions. These codes can be verbal and non-verbal. For example in the Netherlands people react very straight and blunt. A 'yes' is a yes. It is an agreement. And a 'no' means it is not agreed upon. But in other cultures it is considered impolite to say no, certainly when the other is higher up in the hierarchy or when the other is an outsider. Language might lead to a lot of misunderstandings.

Truth

My truth is not THE truth. THE truth does not exist. We can look at reality in different ways.

Listen to each other. Each and every one uses a pair of glasses to try to set in order and position reality. These glasses might have a very fixed focus that prevents from looking at reality in a different manner. Still no one is able to see the complete reality. We will thus only see part of it and even this is subjective and relative.

6. WHAT TO DO WHEN A PROBLEM ARISES?

Problems in the collaboration are often related with parties who do not stick to agreements; the incorrect use of finances; hierarchical relationships; or inadequate communication between the parties.

In order to solve such problems, it is important always to separate the problem from the person! It is crucial to find the reason(s) of the problems. Understanding why a person does something, helps to create mutual understanding. You can use the following questions to analyze a situation:

- Do the partners understand each other's verbal and non verbal language?
- What is the problem according to the partner?
- Do you know each other's point of view and vision on the problem?
- What are the interests involved?
- Are each other's roles and functions clear to all?
- Are the organizational aspects clear, like responsibilities, agreements, arrangements?

The answers to these questions will give you new insights and thus help with finding a solution.





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