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**COMMUNICATION**

Intercultural **COMMUNICATION** Training

A research on the importance of 'shared understanding' regarding professional concepts, terminology and situations in intercultural collaboration settings.

# **Intercultural COMMUNICATION Training**

A research on the importance of 'shared understanding' regarding professional concepts, terminology and situations in intercultural collaboration settings

*Document:* Final Master Thesis Communication studies University of Utrecht  
(January 2007)

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## *Acknowledgements*

It has been a wonderful experience to carry out a research project on the subject that has been the leading thread throughout my study at the University of Utrecht. I would like to thank my two tutors, Robert Maier and Jan ten Thije for their supervision.

Robert showed a great trust in me by giving me the freedom to go ahead with my research proposal although the task seemed little realistic. His observations in the different phases of the research process have been very stimulating. I am grateful to Jan who drew my attention to the study of Müller-Jacquier emphasizing the importance of differentiating all possible perspectives to improve understanding on *causes* of misunderstandings and familiarizing me with his '3 steps procedure' to not only *avoid* but to *go beyond* intercultural misunderstandings. Although conceived for *descriptive* analysis of intercultural communication processes, he authorized the experimental use of his 3 steps procedure to facilitate a reflection with my panel members on occurred misunderstandings resulting in *prescriptive* assumptions for improvement of intercultural communication.

Right at the beginning of my research, Evelien van Asperen contacted me about the research and kindly accepted to provide voluntary guidance. Meeting and exchanging ideas with her was a very inspiring experience since we share similar thoughts. Her theory on intercultural communication became an integrated part of my research project. I want to thank her for the time she spent on me and for her critical watch on the research proceedings, the intermediate analysis of the information and for reading and commenting my thesis. Thanks to Marlon ten Hoonte for her guidance throughout the research process in the form of reading and editing everything I wrote while assuring that I didn't miss any important steps in my process of thought in editing the feedback reports, questionnaires and finally the thesis. At those difficult moments I was wondering whether I could really handle the task, she stimulated me to continue and congratulated me with every accomplished step. I also have to thank Bram Busstra for acting as test person for every discussion round in the research project creating the opportunity to adapt the questionnaires where necessary. Furthermore I would like to thank my husband, my parents and my parents in law for combining their work with the care for my one and half year old daughter making it possible for me to finish my research and to write this master thesis.

Last but not least, the panel members participating in the research deserve my sincere acknowledgments. They made this research to a success, in doing a lot of time-consuming work. Many of them had a hard time struggling with unfamiliar theories, methods and frameworks to be used for the analysis of earlier presented misunderstandings. Their enthusiasm for the subject and their dedication towards the research project has been very motivating for me to continue.

## *Summary*

Intercultural training, among other topics, implies *intercultural communication* mostly linked with the existing *cultural differences* between the communicating parties. In this master thesis I question however, whether in intercultural collaboration, *misunderstanding* occurs because of these cultural differences or because of the mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding concepts and terminology related to their work. Since experts share an identical identity -their professional background- with their colleagues in the host country, they might assume *a shared understanding* on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly to implement their tasks. The mutual assumption of a shared understanding on professional concepts / terminology could be the pitfall for misunderstanding.

*Successful communication* presumes that the speaker's intention -in transferring a message- is the same as the meaning the listener(s) attributes to the message. In case the speaker and the listener share the same ideas, experiences, and/or frames of references, communication will not meet many problems. Habermas (quoted by Kunneman, 1983) distinguished meaning giving related to *life world* and meaning giving related to *system*. He argues that in interaction, people interpret the topics discussed in relation to the context they live and work in -their cultural and historical backgrounds- and labelled this context '*life world*' (private and public organizations). In the way 'Western' experts communicate, life world might be in competition with '*system*' (dominated by economic and administrative organizations). For their colleagues, living in societies that are more traditional however, *system* might be less developed and *life world* could still be playing an important role in professional settings.

To restore the balance between life world and system in communication, creation of a *shared understanding* – a shared language for system and life world- is of great importance. Shared understanding can only be created through true *dialoguing*. In case, no dialogues take place between the actors involved in communicative actions, *misunderstandings* risk occurring. In this thesis, I argue that the art of creating shared

understanding –*dialoguing*- should be an integrated part of the intercultural training experts receive before being sent to *developing countries*. Training experts in the facilitation of *dialogues* with their colleagues in order to create shared understanding – shared language of system and life world- to avoid or overcome misunderstandings is scarcely subject of *intercultural training*. Though training in notably technical skills and belief in the mission of the assignment might –if not correctly decoded- lead to pseudo understanding resulting in misunderstanding.

In the frame of this research project, a well-structured opinion forming process with an expert panel -a *Delphi survey*- was facilitated resulting in a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings. The information from the panel provided clear responses on the research questions:

- 1) *Besides the often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations, what is the role of the mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share?*
  
- 2) *Since both parties are not trained on misunderstandings caused by a mutual assumption of a shared understanding of professional concepts / terminology, they are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Might it be that this type of misunderstandings effects project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences?*

Panel members not only confirmed the importance of creating shared understanding on related concepts and terminology, they also recognized the importance of shared understanding on professional situations and the status related to the positions / functions the different actors held. In their analysis, several panel members distinguished different stages in communication and/or collaboration processes - *idea presentation stage* - *decision-making stage* -, and *implementation stage*- confirming that misunderstandings caused by an assumed shared understanding are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the

collaboration process. These misunderstandings effect project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences.

As integral part of the survey, the panel experimented with an analytical framework enabling actors in intercultural situation to not only analyse intercultural misunderstandings, but to enable them to avoid or to 'go beyond' such misunderstandings. Their recommendations for the use of this framework enable the development of a valuable tool for intercultural communication training.

**Keywords:**

*(Intercultural) communication - misunderstanding - cultural differences - shared understanding - life world - system - dialoguing - intercultural training - Delphi survey - developing countries.*

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***“We are living in a paranoid age,  
in which people fail even to understand  
that they don’t understand each other.”  
Ichheiser (1949)<sup>1</sup>***

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<sup>1</sup> Schneller, R. (1989), *“Intercultural and intrapersonal processes and factors of misunderstanding: implications for multicultural training.”*

## 1. Introduction

Being a child of a Dutch expatriate family, living my entire youth in eastern and western Africa, gave me the possibility to grow up within intercultural situations. Living within a Dutch family in Africa and going to international schools with (other expatriate) children coming from all over the world raised my interest in other cultures and in the way the intercultural contacts develop. Working abroad as an adult is quite different from living and growing up in foreign countries. As a child, you learn and grow up with children from different cultures, creating an identical background on which base you communicate. As an adult, contact has to be made with other adults, having each their experiences dating from their youth. Communicating with each other and understanding each other and each other's background is than not as simple.

Working abroad is reserved to a select group of people who have the expertise needed in the different countries where they are going to work (and sometimes live). In the frame of this research, I label these people as *experts*. In the past years, the world seems to become smaller and the number of experts increases. Consequently, many research projects have been conducted focussing on (technical) competences, relational abilities, and language skills experts need to obtain before leaving their home country to work (and live) abroad. In general, the conclusions are that *intercultural training* is a must. However, the way these trainings should be conducted is still part of a discussion between the different researchers.

In addition to competences, abilities and skills, intercultural training often implies knowledge transfer on *cultural differences* with an emphasis on *misunderstanding*. In preparing experts for intercultural encounters, however, the topic *intercultural communication* –with an emphasis on *communication*- cannot be neglected. Experts will have to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and most probably, they will have to face misunderstandings more related to the art of communication than to existent cultural differences.

The phenomenon of *misunderstanding occurring in intercultural communication situations* is the key topic for my master thesis in communication studies at the University of Utrecht. I wondered whether these miscommunications only find their causes in cultural differences or whether other communication aspects might play a role. The guiding questions for my search are: ‘*What are the main causes of misunderstandings in intercultural communication and/or collaboration (are they only related to cultural differences)?*’ and ‘*How can experts be prepared in such a way that these misunderstandings can be avoided?*’

With this research project I tend exploring possible responses to these questions through a documentary search and a survey in collaboration with an expert panel of people having experienced this type of misunderstandings in their work abroad. The research strategy as accepted by my tutor is in annex 01.

Before synthesizing the theories sustaining this research project (*chapter 3*), I present the research objective and detailed research questions (*chapter 2*). Following the theoretical background information, I describe the methodology of the survey implemented with the participation of nineteen (19) panel members (*chapter 4*). The panel members and a short overview of their cases is subject of the next chapter (*chapter 5*). Finally, the survey results- a consistent set of assumptions (*chapter 6*) and recommendations (*chapter 7*) formulated in collaboration with the panel members is presented. The last chapter of this master thesis consists of my evaluation of the research, and my conclusions and recommendations with regard to the research project (*chapter 8*).

## 2. Research objective and questions

The need for intercultural training to prepare experts leaving their home country to work (and live) abroad has been subject of multiple research projects. In general, the conclusions are that intercultural training is a must. Satish P. Deshpande (1992)<sup>2</sup> examined the impact of cross-cultural training on the effectiveness of expatriate managers. He used a meta-analytical framework to analyze all existing literature, including non-published theses of students resulting in the conclusion that intercultural training should be part of the preparatory phase for expatriates before leaving their home country to work abroad. Intercultural training, among other topics, implies *intercultural communication* mostly linked with the existing *cultural differences* between the communicating parties.

I question however, whether in intercultural collaboration, misunderstanding occurs because of these cultural differences or because of the mutual assumption members of a same profession hold regarding concepts and terminology related to their work. Since experts share a professional background with their colleagues in the host country, they might assume '*a shared understanding*' on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly to implement their tasks.

Experts going abroad often receive training in *intercultural differences* as preparation for encounters with various identities. But once abroad they get in contact with colleagues with whom they share one identical identity: the work field to which they all belong. I believe that the mutual assumption of a shared understanding on professional concepts / terminology could be an important pitfall for misunderstanding.

Based on this assumption, I formulated the research objective and research questions, and identified the target group for the survey conducted in the frame of this master thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Deshpande, S. P.(1992), "*Is cross-cultural training of expatriate managers effective: a meta analysis.*"

## 2.1 Research objective

In my opinion, misunderstandings might occur in situations where people are no longer aware of cultural differences because they find themselves in a situation with someone with the same identity. One assumes a situation of shared understanding. This could happen for example in case the expert travelling abroad finds himself in the situation of communicating with people from another culture having the same professional background.

Based on theoretical knowledge obtained after a documentary search throughout my studies, I choose for an interactive survey methodology- the Delphi method - to verify my hypothesis (see *chapter 4*). Nineteen (19) panel members - experts with working experience in developing countries - participated in a facilitated reflection on misunderstandings encountered by them in intercultural collaboration situations. Jointly, we formulated a set of assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication that could be used for the development of intercultural communication training to prepare experts for their work abroad. The research objective thus being:

*Facilitating a well-structured opinion forming process among western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries resulting in a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication.*

In the frame of this research project, the objective was made operational through the following steps:

- a) *Identification of current misunderstandings in intercultural collaboration settings caused by -the often quoted- cultural differences between the communicating parties, as well as those caused by a mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding a 'shared understanding' on professional concepts and terminology.*
  
- b) *Formulation of a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings.*

## 2.2 Target group

The target group of this research project was:

*Western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries, and/ or western experts involved in training people in (or from) developing countries.*

## 2.3 Research questions

With this research project I searched to test the following hypothesis:

*Misunderstandings in the intercultural professional field occur because of sharing professional backgrounds; actors might assume a shared understanding on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly in implementing their tasks*

To test this hypothesis the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) *Besides the often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations, what is the role of the mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share?*
  
- 2) *Since both parties are not trained on misunderstandings caused by a mutual assumption of a shared understanding of professional concepts / terminology, they are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Might it be that this type of misunderstandings effects project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences?*

In the following chapter I provide more in-depth knowledge on the theories used to formulate these research questions and the theories used during the research project.

### 3. Sustaining theory

Right at the start of my first bachelor course of interdisciplinary Social Science at the University of Utrecht, I learned about the *'Theory of Communicative Action'* by Jurgen Habermas (1984).<sup>3</sup> His notion of *shared understanding* struck me as a very important element in intercultural communication. Being raised in foreign countries and thus confronted with many misunderstandings occurring in intercultural communication, I thought to have found a solution to problems I experienced so often.

The assumption that creation of *'shared understanding'* (of situations and terminology) through facilitated dialogues could be an important aspect in intercultural communication became a guiding principle for the rest of my Communication Studies. Assisted by my personal network and in the master courses, I developed a personal databank consisting books, articles and quotations, supporting my assumption.

During my internship for my masters, I tested my conviction that new concepts / vocabulary to be introduced in intercultural setting should be subject of a facilitated dialogue to reach a *'shared understanding'* before participants in an international training can work with those concepts once 'back home'. The assumption supporting this kind of technical skill training probably is the existence of a *'shared understanding'* related to the assumed shared identity of the participants –their professional background.

In the frame of this research project for my master degree – main subject of this thesis- I was enabled to deepen my knowledge on the importance of shared understanding in intercultural communication by an e-mail exchange with experienced western experts working in developing countries. In doing so, I could explore my earlier developed personal database resulting in a good selection of underpinning theories as presented in this chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Dodd, N. (1999), "*Social theory and modernity*"

### 3.1 Theory related to misunderstanding

Schneller (1989)<sup>4</sup> argues that *understanding* can take one of three forms:

1. 'When a message has been sent and is correctly decoded (i.e. the meaning attributed by the receiver is highly similar to the intention of the sender), one may speak of satisfying or "*positive understanding*".
2. On the other hand, when the transmitted code does not exist in the receiver's experience and pool of knowledge, it is called "*non-understanding*".
3. The third possibility is "*misunderstanding*." It is the result of pseudo-understanding: the addressee attributes a certain meaning rooted in his own individual pool of knowledge to the sender's signal or sign. But this meaning attribution differs, or even contradicts, the sender's intention when he/she encodes the message.' (p.3)

In case, the communicating actors *assume* that the meaning attributed by the receiver is highly similar to the intention of the sender –often the case if people share the same identity- a misunderstanding might occur caused by false decoding and a high degree of certainty.

Shuter (1979) quoted by Schneller (1989) describes:

'This false decoding is rooted in the subjective interpretation of information (Shuter, 1979) and is based on the ethnocentric and personal life experience of the decoder. As a result of the decoder's lack of awareness of misinterpretation, which is evident from his high level of certainty, no internal monologue takes place. Dissonance is deactivated, and no further mental effort is invested to clarify or to verify the interpretation. Finally, the receiver acts or responds according to his initial decoding. Thus, the communication act may be termed "negative" communication, with all its accompanying behavioural outcomes.' (p.7)

### 3.2 Theory related to successful communication

Successful communication presumes that speaker's intention -in transferring a message- is the same as the meaning the listener(s) attributes to the message. In case the speaker and the listener share the same ideas, experiences, and/or frames of references, communication will not meet many problems. But if there is even a slightest difference between the speaker's message and the meaning the listener attributes to this message,

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<sup>4</sup> Schneller, R. (1989), "*Intercultural and intrapersonal processes and factors of misunderstanding: implications for multicultural training.*"



misunderstanding occurs. One could say that the bigger the differences between the speaker and the listener, the greater the possibility of a failed communication or failed understanding, Schneller (1989)<sup>5</sup>:

‘Successful communication depends on and is conditioned by a similarity between the sender’s intention and the receiver’s attribution of meaning (Condon, 1977; Salomon, 1981). Such similarity can be expected with interactants who share ideas and affects, experiences and frames of reference. It is most frequently found among people brought up in the same culture and environment (Szalay, 1981). However, even among members of the same culture shared expectations are not always justified. Differences in personality and life experience usually develop separate subjective meanings. This is even more true of interactants from separate cultural groups: each one grows up in his own subjective culture with its own set of beliefs and attitudes (Stening, 1979). Discrepancies, then, between the sender’s intention and the receiver’s interpretation may be more the rule than the exception (Schneller, 1988b). Thus, the greater the cultural distance, the greater the probability of missed or failed understanding.’ (p.2)

Not only Schneller believes that ‘*differences in personality and life experience usually develop subjective meanings*’, van Asperen (2005)<sup>6</sup> quotes Sperber and Wilson (1986) concluding that:

‘(...) the relevance of the same communicated message can differ completely from person X to person Y, also if they belong to the same culture. Their explanation is that every person has a unique personal history and expresses the influence of this personal history in the interpretation of new events.’ (p.81)

Habermas (Kunneman, 1983)<sup>7</sup> argues that, in interaction, people interpret the topics discussed in relation to the context they live and work in -their cultural and historical backgrounds- and labelled this context ‘*life world*’ (private and public organizations). In the way ‘Western’ experts communicate, life world might be in competition with ‘*system*’ (dominated by economic and administrative organizations). In *system*, the influence of communicative action is decreasing to the minimum in favour of strategic - goal oriented- rational action, focusing on the increase of own (personal) benefits.

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<sup>5</sup> Schneller, R. (1989), “*Intercultural and intrapersonal processes and factors of misunderstanding: implications for multicultural training.*”

<sup>6</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology*”

<sup>7</sup> Kunneman H. (1983), “*Habermas’ Theorie van het communicatieve handelen*’, *Een samenvatting.*”

In people's communication in Western societies, *system* is dominant and has -by using power and money- increasingly colonized the *lifeworld*. In addition, media are used to resolve problems which basically could only be resolved by means of communicative action. Besides money, power, and use of media, '*the language of the system*' (presented as 'objective truth') became a medium to colonize the lifeworld. In people's communication in societies that are more traditional-like in most developing countries-, *system* might be less developed and *life world* could still be playing an important role in professional settings.

To restore the balance between life world and system in communication, creation of a *shared understanding* – a shared language for system and life world- is of great importance. Shared understanding can only be created through true *dialoguing*. In case, no dialogues take place between the actors involved in communicative actions, misunderstandings risk occurring.

In this thesis, I argue that the art of creating shared understanding –*dialoguing*- should be an integrated part of the intercultural training experts receive before being sent to developing countries. After all, experts from the Western world are dominated by *system* language –thinking in 'concepts', 'models' and using 'jargon' related to their professions, while their future colleagues in developing countries attach more importance to their *life world*. Training experts in the facilitation of dialogues with their colleagues in order to create shared understanding –shared language of system and life world- and thus enabling the detection of false decoding and certainty reduction might assist in avoiding misunderstandings in the (intercultural) communication.

### **3.3 Theory related to intercultural training**

In the frame of this thesis, I work with the definition of intercultural training as defined by Zakaria (2000)<sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>8</sup> Zakaria,N. (2000), "*The effects of cross-cultural training on the acculturation process of the global workforce.*"

Intercultural training is ‘*any procedure used to increase an individual's ability to cope with and work in a foreign environment*’ (p.6)

Below I will first briefly assess the existing –*culture general* and *culture specific*-intercultural trainings. Secondly, I plead for the development of a more *communication specific* intercultural training.

### **3.3.1 Assessment existing intercultural training**

In the literature, different forms of training can be distinguished and can be roughly classified in two main categories: *culture general* and *culture specific* trainings:

‘The culture general approach emphasizes overall cultural concepts in lieu of specific information about a particular culture, which is used in the culture-specific training methods.’ (p.12) Gammel (1998)<sup>9</sup>

Some training institutes prefer *combining culture general* and *culture specific training*.

The subject of both training types is very much focussed on the role of cultural differences when analysing problems and –in my opinion- less on communication. Van Asperen (2005)<sup>10</sup> also criticizes the importance of cultural differences when analysing eventual problems surrounding intercultural communication:

‘Cultural differences are usually cited as explanations for these problems. This means that the culture concept acquires significant meaning in intercultural situation definitions and that cultural differences are considered to be an explanatory model for problems. (p.33)

I argue that most misunderstandings occur in situations where people are no longer aware of cultural differences because they find themselves in a situation with someone with the same (profession related) identity. The communicating actors assume a shared understanding on concepts and terminology related to the profession both share.

As stated under 3.1, the creation of *shared understanding* requires true *dialogues* between communicating actors to avoid misunderstandings in the (intercultural) communication. The art of dialoguing and the creation of shared understanding are communicative actions,

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<sup>9</sup> Gammel, D. (1998), “*Cross-cultural Training and International Assignments*”

<sup>10</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology*”

whether they take place in intercultural situations or not. In the research project I facilitated with a panel of 19 experts (see chapter 6), panel members repeatedly remarked that most misunderstandings occurring in their intercultural encounters are more related to communication skills than to cultural differences. Thus supporting my conviction that in intercultural training more attention should be paid to communication, emphasizing the importance of *shared understanding*. My conviction oriented my documentary study to search for a fourth type of intercultural training in which the art of communication gets the place it deserves.

To shortly present the existent ‘*culture general*’- and ‘*culture specific*’ intercultural training types, as well as its combination, I mainly base the text hereunder on the inventory Gammel (1998) made in his thesis ‘*Cross-cultural Training and International Assignments*’.<sup>11</sup>

### 1. Culture specific

Culture specific trainings are conducted specifically about the host country of the expatriate. Language training and specific knowledge with ‘*to do and not to do*’ information:

‘Factual briefings impart knowledge about the host country’s history, society, and important cultural taboos and norms. Cultural adjustment training helps expatriates and their families to develop skills that will allow them to better adapt to the host culture.’ (p.8) Gammel (1998)

This form of training may possibly retrieve some anxiety of the expatriate before leaving his/ her home country. They leave the training with the feeling having received all the necessary information on the new country.

### 2. Culture general

Cultural general trainings aim at self-awareness of the trainees regarding their behaviour with respect to the behaviour of people they will meet in foreign countries.

‘Once people become more self-aware, they tend to be better at predicting the effects of their behaviour on others. After they learn

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<sup>11</sup> Gammel, D. (1998), “*Cross-cultural Training and International Assignments*”

something about other culture and begin to understand the cultural 'map' they know how to modify their behaviour to meet the expectations of the new society.' (p.10) Zakaria (2000)<sup>12</sup>

Cultural differences classified under the four dimensions identified by Geert Hofstede in his study '*Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen*' (1991)<sup>13</sup> is an important topic in cultural general training. The dimensions described by Hofstede - '*collectivistic versus individualistic*', '*high power versus low power tolerance*', '*uncertainty avoidance versus uncertainty tolerance*' and '*masculine versus feminine*'- are subject of many exercises and role-plays.

Gammel (1998)<sup>14</sup>, with Hofstede, believes that '*culture is "mental software," in that it predisposes individuals for certain inputs which are processed in a familiar way for a certain set of outputs, or actions*':

'Geert Hofstede has defined culture as the "software of the mind." Hofstede compares culture to a computer program, in that individuals learn and acquire patterns of thinking, feeling and acting over time that influence their actions and perceptions.' (p.5)

### 3. Culture general combined with culture specific

In his thesis, Gammel (1998) quotes Gary Weaver (...) to describe the combined culture general and specific trainings:

'Gary Weaver has identified four areas that training should assist expatriates in: anticipating the stress of cross-cultural adjustment; facilitating the development of coping strategies; helping the expatriate feel confident that they will be able to adjust successfully to the new culture; and to assist the expatriate in understanding the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Weaver offers these requirements as a contrast to training that consists solely of country-specific information or lists of "do's and taboo's." He indicates that it is better to proceed from culture general information to culture specific in order to avoid the creation of stereotypes without the greater context of understanding about the role and influence of culture.'(p.11)

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<sup>12</sup> Zakaria, N. (2000), "*The effects of cross-cultural training on the acculturation process of the global workforce.*"

<sup>13</sup> Hofstede G (1991), "*Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen.*"

<sup>14</sup> Gammel, D. (1998), "*Cross-cultural Training and International Assignments*"

More general concerning intercultural training, Gammel (1998) defines five success factors in his thesis which I think are of great use. However, communication skills are totally omitted:

- *Technical competence*: Expatriate's technical skill, organizational ability, and belief in the mission of the assignment;
- *Relational abilities*: Cultural empathy and ability to adjust to host culture;
- *Family situation*: Family's cultural empathy and ability to adjust to host culture, and their level of support for going on international assignment;
- *Language skill*: Speaking and writing ability of expatriate in the host-country language;
- *Host environment*: The political, legal, and socio economic system of the host country.'(p.14)

In short, intercultural training aims at uncertainty reduction of the (future) expatriate and (in) directly of his / her family in providing information to enhance technical competence, relational abilities, and language skills. However, the certainty obtained by means of such competence and skills training might lead to pseudo understanding –possibly resulting in misunderstanding- once confronted with colleagues in foreign countries as defined by Schneller (1989)<sup>15</sup> and presented under 3.1.2.

As stated before, communication skills –particularly *dialoguing* in order to create *shared understanding*- to avoid or overcome misunderstandings is scarcely subject of intercultural training. Though training in notably *technical skills* and *belief in the mission of the assignment* might –if not correctly decoded- lead to *pseudo understanding* resulting in *misunderstanding*.

### **3.3.2 Development of a Communication Specific Intercultural Training**

Intercultural communication training is subject to critics from various scientists who are more oriented towards communication than to cultural differences. In her thesis, van Asperen(2005)<sup>16</sup> states that *'those who took a seminar in intercultural communication found it interesting, but it seldom contributed to any solutions'*(p.51). She quotes Gilroy

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<sup>15</sup> Schneller, R. (1989), *"Intercultural and intrapersonal processes and factors of misunderstanding: implications for multicultural training."*

<sup>16</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), *"Intercultural Communication & Ideology"*

criticizing these types of training as well as Shadid who pleads for another type of training:

- Van Asperen (2005): 'It is an illusion to think that cultural knowledge improves communication and it is just as much an illusion to think that improving communicative skills can solve problems of conflicting values. Knowledge of other cultures, at its best, leads to a realisation of cultural diversity.' (p. 97)
- 'Gilroy (2001) says in an interview: 'Culture is frequently used as a less offensive label to indicate racial differences. Of course, there are differences between people, but cultures are permanently dynamic. A difference today may be non-existent tomorrow. What then is the use of speaking in terms of culture?' (p.39)
- 'Shadid (1998) publishes an extensive overview of national and international experts in the areas of culture and communication. He pleads for the approach of everyone as an independent person and points out the danger of cultural difference as a criterion for exclusion.' (p.37)

As might be clear from the preceding chapters, I strongly support the critics quoted above, and search for new methodologies for intercultural communication training not emphasizing the enhancement of technical competences, relational abilities, language skills and knowledge on cultural differences but emphasizing communication, dialogue and shared understanding.

Three authors - ten Thije, Müller-Jacquier, and van Asperen - provided theories that I value of great use for the development of a new training methodology for intercultural training giving *communication* the place it merits. In the research project with the panel members, we explored these theories resulting in a coherent set of assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication and probably of great value for the development of a new type of training: *communication specific intercultural training*. Although conceived for *descriptive* analysis of intercultural communication processes, the experimental use of ten Thije's 3 steps procedure, as reflection on occurred misunderstandings in order to identify *-prescriptive-* assumptions for improvement of intercultural communication might open new possibilities for its use in training situations. He also drew my attention to the study of Müller-Jacquier proving that differentiation of all possible perspectives provides important information to improve understanding on *causes* of misunderstandings. The thesis of Evelien van Asperen –emphasizing the

importance of various views on diversity in the occurrence of misunderstandings-completed the documentation needed for my research.

Hereunder, I will shortly outline the three theories and the accompanying analytical frameworks as used in the expert survey (see chapter 4).

### 3.3.2.1 Linguistic Awareness of Cultures (LAC)

Müller-Jacquier (2004)<sup>17</sup> argues that training programs, as mentioned under 3.2 do not take into account the *linguistic differences* existing between cultures:

‘(...) major problems with the perception of foreign training approaches lie in their normative approach to problem solving and their biased focus on pedagogic- psychological factors. Intercultural communication problems are primarily explained psychologically (i.e. the interactors having different value systems), without explicit documentation and analysis of the concrete underlying verbal and non-verbal behaviour.’  
(p.3)

The LAC training program ‘*provides the linguistic categories necessary for the description of typical problems occurring in intercultural interaction.*’ (p.5) Linguistic awareness of cultures is defined as follows:

‘All cultural differences are ‘hidden’ in linguistic manifestations. These expressions of cultural difference are found in all languages and they can be classified in different grammatical and lexical categories or even be expressed non-verbally. They are presented in culture-specific explicit or implicit forms by both speakers and listeners. This further means that there is a source of mutual misunderstanding, when these linguistic indicators or manifestations are not perceived by the interactors’ (p.8)

The LAC training program of Müller-Jacquier is based on the following assumption:

‘In intercultural communication most people tend to subconsciously apply their own culture’s communicative conventions and also to interpret the other-cultural response on this basis.’ (p.12)

Müller-Jacquier developed an analytical framework, facilitating the assessment of *misunderstandings* in communication. Various perspectives can be analysed by means of six topics resulting in important information on likely *causes* of misunderstandings. An advantage of this framework is the creation of reflection possibilities on perspectives one

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<sup>17</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), “*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*”



hold *and* on the possible perspectives of other actors in the verbalizing process (communication). A disadvantage however is that the framework emphasizes the differences between the actors instead of leading to how to go beyond misunderstanding' (e.g. through the achievement of 'shared understanding').

***Analytical framework of the Linguistic Awareness of Culture (LAC) training component by Müller-Jacquier<sup>18</sup>:***

**a) Social Meaning of words / terminology**

People use words to express social representations and to evoke these in others; patterns of mental imagery, here also termed concepts. These patterns are distinctly culture-specific. Actors in intercultural situations have to pay close attention to potentially different representations of the social meaning of words / terminology. Actors should try to deduce these from (conceptualised) utterances of their conversation partner.

**b) Speech Acts**

While speaking, actors can perform activities and manifest behaviour intentions. In intercultural situations, actors frequently cannot distinguish between a behaviour intention and its realization through verbal and non-verbal expressions even in our mother tongue. Something may sound like a question, but in some cultures it could mean a statement. Someone might formulate a sentence in one culture, which sounds like an order in another.

**c) Choice of topic**

Specific rules are set by cultures regarding the choice of topics: some topics might be considered taboo and others can only be chosen in certain situations.

**d) Directness versus indirectness**

Confronted with vague or indirect utterances embedded into a context, actors used to express their intentions directly might feel a need to find out more about their meta-communicative intention, cause and form.

'In principle, such meta-communicative activities can be used to clarify the conventions and problems of communication. However, experience has shown that precisely in cultures applying indirect modes of communication in order to achieve discourse harmony, a shift to meta levels is considered to be potentially face-threatening and therefore taboo.'

**e) Functional varieties of speech**

Actors can choose alternative formulations depending on the situation (from very ritualised to very informal); the status of the person being addressed; the age, rank, gender of the actors present; the level of speech (formal – informal) chosen by the actors. The choice of functional varieties of speech constitutes the situation and defines/ confirms the relationships.

**f) Cultural specific values / attitudes**

The interpreted behaviour of actors based on their culture-specific value systems (and not on the use of different communication conventions) can be analysed by using e.g. Hofstede's four dimensions, each with a scale according to which he determines culture-specific and behaviour guiding values worldwide.

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<sup>18</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), "*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*"

### 3.3.2.2 Views on diversity

Van Asperen (2005)<sup>19</sup> states that approaches as the LAC training described above, emphasize the differences between cultures, thus creating the communicative style of ‘*us versus them*’. This risks leading towards two variants on views on diversity:

- 1) Monistic view: ‘*only one single view of the world can be correct: It’s either yours or mine, but actually, it’s mine.*’
- 2) Relativistic view: ‘*the world consists of cultures of equal value’ and these ‘cultural views of the world can only be understood from inside that culture.*’ (p.117)

She mentions that these kind of approaches with their ‘*monistic and relativistic variants (do) not offer any solutions, but intensify the problems instead*’(p.101). In addition, she introduces an alternative view:






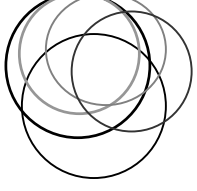

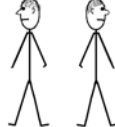

- 3) Communicative moral universalism: communication focuses on ‘*all of us together*’, which tends to *avoid or overcome* intercultural misunderstandings.

The analytical framework she developed permits the communicating actors to detect their view on diversity as well as the views of other actors. However, in inviting people to assess their own views, one should emphasize that the analysis evaluates situations and not personalities: one is not monistic / relativistic, but acted as such in the given situation.

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<sup>19</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*”

*Analytical framework of Views on Diversity by Evelien van Asperen<sup>20</sup>*

Intercultural ideology		Alternative
<u>Views on the World</u>		
<p>1. <i>Monism</i></p> 	<p>2. <i>Relativism</i></p> 	<p>3. <i>Communicative moral universalism*)</i></p> 
<p>Only one single view of the world can be correct: It's either yours or mine, but actually it's mine.</p>	<p>The world consists of cultures of equal value. Cultural views of the world can only be understood from inside that culture. We allow each other freedom.</p>	<p>Diverse views of the world are possible. Discussions on diversity are crucial. Universal fundamental values dictate that nobody has the right to exclude another. There is a continuous search for a balance between dependence and autonomy.</p>
<p>*)Vertical stripes symbolize different views of the world. Horizontal stripes symbolize universal fundamental rights.</p>		
<u>Views on culture and diversity</u>		
<p>1. <i>Monism</i></p> 	<p>2. <i>Relativism</i></p> 	<p>3. <i>Communicative moral universalism</i></p> 
<p>There is only one civilization. Other cultures are primitive or backward.</p>	<p>Culture is determinant for people. Cultures are completely separate phenomena. Cultures are of equal value.</p>	<p>Every person is unique. Cultural events, connotations and relationships are modified as a result of a continuous process of human interaction.</p>
<u>Views on man</u>		
<p>1. <i>monism</i></p> 	<p>2. <i>relativism</i></p> 	<p>3. <i>communicative moral universalism</i></p> 
<p>We are more competent than they are. They are less competent than we are. We should tell them how things are done.  (Us versus them)</p>	<p>A person is determined (by his culture). A person is determined, and thus cannot be held responsible. A person is shaped in the first years of life.  (Us versus them)</p>	<p>Depending on circumstances, every person has some degree of free choice. A person is responsible for his own behavior and is in that sense also responsible for the greater community. Persons are capable of change.  (All of us together)</p>

<sup>20</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), "Intercultural Communication & Ideology."

### 3.3.2.3 Three sequential steps of the verbalizing process

The LAC analytic framework<sup>21</sup>, alike the first two views in the framework of van Asperen<sup>22</sup>, facilitates evaluating *causes of misunderstandings*. In contrast, the three sequential steps ten Thije<sup>23</sup> developed permit analysing the *interaction between actors*. In his study, he describes and analyses communication processes in which no misunderstandings appear and argues that in all those cases, actors followed the three steps of the verbalizing process:

- 1) Generalizing: *'the actors verbalize their own expectations as realizations of standard solutions of their own cultural group'*
- 2) Perspectivising: *'Actors anticipate possible differences with the standard problems and solutions of other cultural groups; they relate their knowledge to those of others by taking their cultural standards into account. 'Perspectivising' works as a result of the speaker monitoring the hearer's reactions in discourse. In case the speaker spots (re)actions from the hearer proving that his knowledge on the social reality is not being understood, he / she can adapt his speech.'*
- 3) Contrasting cultures: *'The speaker enables the hearer to compare the speaker's cultural standards with his own and attain an adequate interpretation of the discourse. Finally they will attain intercultural understanding.'* (p.16)

The procedure reconstructs *how shared understanding* in intercultural discourse is brought about. The 3 steps procedure enables communicating actors to not only *avoid* but also *to go beyond* intercultural misunderstandings by emphasizing the importance of *communicative expectations* actors hold in an intercultural discourse.

### 3.3.2.4 Experimenting the theories in the research process

In my research, I sustain the importance of *'communicative expectations'* but narrow it to *'mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share'*.

The panel members analysed their previously presented misunderstanding by means of the LAC framework and identified the dominant view on diversity in that case. Finally,

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<sup>21</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), "*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*"

<sup>22</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), "*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*"

<sup>23</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), "*Perspectivising intercultural discourse.*"

they assessed the 3 steps procedure on its usefulness to avoid similar misunderstandings in future (as explained under 3.3.2). In doing so, the panel confirmed my assumption that achieving *contrasting cultures* through true dialoguing as meant by ten Thije, includes achieving *communicative moral universalism view* as described by van Asperen as well as the creation of *shared understanding* as I understand from Habermas (see 3.2.).

#### 4. Methodology for the expert survey

The research questions (*chapter 2*) focusing on the practical situation of western experts working abroad or working with trainees from developing countries were formulated, based on the theories presented in *chapter 3*. In order to answer the research questions, I search to link information derived from the practical expertise of the target group (*chapter 2*) with theoretical knowledge.

To verify the theory with practical knowledge, I adopted a Delphi research method and facilitated *a well-structured opinion forming process among western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries resulting in a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication.*

In this chapter, I shortly synthesize the principles of the Delphi method, followed by a description of the identification of panel members and the discussion rounds.

##### 4.1. Principles of the Delphi-method

The research has been conducted following the Delphi- method <sup>24</sup>:

*'The Delphi method is based on structural surveys and makes use of the intuitive available information of the participants, who are mainly experts. Therefore, it delivers qualitative as well as quantitative results and has beneath its explorative, predictive even normative elements. There is not the one Delphi methodology but the applications are diverse. There is agreement that Delphi is an expert survey in two or more 'rounds' in which in the second and later rounds of the survey the results of the previous round are given as feedback. Therefore, the experts answer from the second round on under the influence of their colleagues' opinions.'* (p.96) <sup>25</sup>

The group of experts taking part in the survey is assumed to be experienced with the research issues and acted as a 'panel'. The panel members proved capable to provide knowledge *from within* instead of *on* them. The intention was that the panel members and

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<sup>24</sup> 't Hart e.a. (1996), "*Onderzoeksmethoden.*"

<sup>25</sup> Kerstin Cuhls (prepared by), "*Delphi Method.*"

me (as researcher) dialogue together by means of a facilitated and well-structured e-mail correspondence, in at least three discussion rounds.

Characteristic for Delphi is that the information resulting from the discussion rounds is analyzed and presented to the panel in a synthesized form. The syntheses of each discussion round and the related new questions formed the basis for the next round, after which the procedure restarted in order to deepen the discussion among the panel members and myself. In the course of the last discussion round, a systematic overview of the various opinions resulted in a more or less *shared understanding* –in the form of a set of assumptions and recommendations- among panel members on the causes of misunderstandings occurred in –and the improvement of- intercultural professional communication and /or collaboration. In addition, the Delphi method facilitated a *mutual learning process* –knowledge transfer between panel members and myself and between participating panel members. In repeated turns, the panel members were invited to adapt and / or complete their earlier expressed opinions, or to present new opinions, taking into account the provided synthesis of prior discussion rounds. As a result, I –the researcher- had to adapt the presentation of theoretical input and analytical methods to the opinions expressed by the panel. *Anonymity* of the panel members has been respected. In that way, a *confrontation of opinions* was facilitated and a confrontation of individual panel members avoided.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.2. Identification of panel members**

A first identification of possible panel members took place by exploring the personal contacts I made throughout my life as a child of an expatriate family (parents of my friends and friends of my parents). An invitation letter (see annex 02) with the first questionnaire - the first discussion round- was e-mailed to those contacts. Some of them forwarded the e-mail to other friends resulting in a total of fifty-four (54) invitations. The following selection criteria for panel members were set:

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<sup>26</sup> Marlon ten Hoonte (1986), unpublished, “*De praktische betekenis van ontwikkelingsprojecten voor het emancipatiebeleid; een beleidsgerichte Delphi studie.*”

- *Western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries, and/ or*
- *Western experts involved in training people in (or from) developing countries.*

### **4.3. Discussion rounds**

The facilitated discussion between panel members and panel members and myself consisted of three discussion rounds.

#### **4.3.1 First discussion round**

The first questionnaire (annex 03) aimed to obtain general information to situate the panel members: name, gender, profession, experience in intercultural collaboration / communication, eventual participation in an acculturation training, etc. Summarized theoretical information was provided on *misunderstandings in intercultural communication / collaboration* to be used by respondents for the presentation of one or two short *narratives* of misunderstandings experienced by them in intercultural settings. In this first discussion round the search was restricted to:

*Experienced misunderstandings occurred in intercultural communication / collaboration situations that occurred in the professional field between the colleagues in (or from) developing countries and / or trainees and the western expert, which influenced (future) project / task implementation.*

For the data treatment and to assure an anonymous feedback of the information in the second discussion round, a code system was used for each panel member. Based on the information obtained, a synthesis report of the first round (see annex 04) was edited on which the questionnaire for the second discussion round was based.

#### **4.3.2 Second discussion round**

The second round aimed at guiding the panel members in analyzing the causes of the misunderstanding described in their narratives. The narratives were written from the



experts' perspectives, leaving out a lot of information, which made it impossible for an outsider to make a well-structured analysis. To facilitate their analysis, panel members were invited to analyze their own narratives making use of the analytical frameworks presented in chapter 3.3 combined in a well-structured questionnaire (see annex 05):

- a) *Analytical framework related to cultural / linguistic differences* conceived by Müller-Jacquier (2004)<sup>27</sup> including the value dimensions of Hofstede G (1991)<sup>28</sup> and Hofstede G. J. (2002)<sup>29</sup>; combined with the first two views of the *Analytical framework of views on diversity* introduced by Van Asperen (2005)<sup>30</sup> and the
- b) *Analytical framework or 3 sequential steps in the verbalizing process* developed by Ten Thije (2003)<sup>31</sup> combined with the last view on diversity of the *Analytical framework of views on diversity* introduced by Van Asperen (2005).

This second round was the most intensive and time consuming one, demanding lot of reflection work of the panel members. Yet, this round also constituted the mutual learning process between individual panel members and researcher resulting in interesting e-mail discussions.

The analysis each panel member made for his/her narrative(s) enabled me to formulate a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings to be validated in the third discussion round.

### 4.3.3 Third discussion round

The analysis of the responses resulted in an interesting set of assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings,

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<sup>27</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), "*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*"

<sup>28</sup> Hofstede G (1991), "*Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen.*"

<sup>29</sup> Hofstede, G. J., P. B. Pedersen, et al. (2002), "*Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures.*"

<sup>30</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), "*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*"

<sup>31</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), "*Perspectivising intercultural discourse.*"

presented in the synthesis report of the second round in preparation for the third discussion round (see annex 06 and more detailed in chapter 6 and 7). In addition, useful recommendations for a more operational analytical framework could be formulated. These assumptions and recommendations were subject of the third questionnaire (see annex 07) in which panel members were asked to validate the formulated assumptions and recommendations.

#### **4.4. Final report**

The present master thesis constitutes the final report and will only be sent to the panel members on demand.

#### **4.5 Time schedule**

In the invitation letter, a tentative time schedule was presented to the panel. However, in the second round panel members needed more time for their reflections and I had to adapt the schedule slightly, prolonging it with one week. In annex 08, the time schedule as applied for the realization of the survey is presented.

## **5. Presentation of expert panel and narratives**

For this research, fifty-four (54) western experts have been invited to participate in an expert survey. As described earlier, they were identified on their working experience in developing countries. The first discussion round of the survey was restricted to obtain general information from participating panel members and receiving one or two narratives concerning misunderstandings taken place between them and their colleagues in their professional field.

In this chapter, I will present the participating panel members and the narratives they send in the first round of the survey.

### **5.1 The panel members**

In first instance, twenty-five (25) out of fifty-four (54) invited experts reacted positively on the invitation for participation in the research project. From this group, eighteen (18) questionnaires were received and treated in the first discussion round. During the second round, one (1) new member joined the panel. Consequently, the panel consisted of nineteen (19) members, of which three (3) female. Six (6) nationalities were represented: Dutch (11), Australian (2); British (2); American (1); Danish (1), Spanish (1) and one (1) panel member of whom the nationality is not known to me.

The majority of the panel members (13) is in the age group older than 50, only four (4) panel members did not reach the 40 yet. Accordingly, the general working experience of all panel members is impressive as is their experience as expert in developing countries, covering seven (7) continents:

- 7 members between 5 to 8 years, 6 in Asia (2 of them equally in Africa) and 1 in Africa;
- 9 members between 19 to 28 years, in Africa (7), Asia (7), South America (3) and the Caribbean (2)
- 3 members more than 30 years, in Africa (2), Asia (2), Islands Pacific (1) and Eastern Europe (1)

The panel covers a variety of professional responsibilities:

- 7 members are project manager and / or have advisory tasks in project management
- 5 members are specialized in nature resources management and conservation / ecology
- 5 members are specialized in training / (adult) education (various professional backgrounds: forestry, social science, Mennonite pastor, medical doctor)
- 1 member specialized in tourism after a long carrier as diplomat
- 1 member is consultant in public sector development

Ten (10) of the panel members received an intercultural training in preparation on their work in developing countries.

Finally fourteen (14) of the panel members (74%) participated in the second round and twelve (12) of them (83%) in the third and last round.

## **5.2. Narratives**

In the first survey round, the nineteen (19) panel members provided in total thirty-two (32) narratives dealing with misunderstandings experienced in intercultural collaboration. Sixteen (16) of the misunderstandings described originate from Asia (9 in China, 2 in Nepal, 1 in Indonesia, 1 in Sri Lanka, 1 Iraq, 2 did not describe a specific country in Asia); eleven (11) from Africa (3 in West Africa, 6 in Southern Africa and 2 in East Africa); one (1) misunderstanding occurred in South America and 2 panel members presented misunderstandings they experienced in training situations in multi cultural settings with participants from different continents.

In the second survey round, twenty-two (22) of these narratives were analysed by fourteen (14) panel members in the second round resulting in assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication (see chapter 6 and 7).

## 6. Set of assumptions for an improved communication in intercultural settings; result of the expert survey

In this chapter, the results of the second and third survey round are combined resulting in a set of basic assumptions for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings. For each assumption, the information resulting in its formulation is synthesized and completed with the appreciation of the panel members. The information obtained through the analytical work of the panel provided clear responses on the research questions:

- 1) *Besides the often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations, what is the role of the mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share?*

The panel members support the idea that a mutual assumption of *shared understanding* regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share is indeed an important cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations. In addition to this confirmation, the panel members emphasized the importance of shared understanding on professional situations and the status related to the positions / functions the different actors hold (see 6.1, '*Shared understanding*'). This is in line with the conclusion Koole and ten Thije (1994) formulated in their study with regard to the relationship between institutional and intercultural communication. They argue that institutional discourse should be analysed before showing the intercultural structures.<sup>32</sup>

The often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations has been recognized although several panel members mentioned that these cultural differences could not be generalized

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<sup>32</sup> Koole, Tom / Thije, Jan D ten (1994), *The Construction of Intercultural Discourse. Team discussions of educational advisers*

to an entire culture but is related to personalities (see 6.2, '*Often quoted cultural differences*').

Besides answering the research question, the panel provided additional interesting information. In analysing their narratives, several panel members claimed that misunderstandings could be created on purpose to improve personal negotiation positions. In the third round, the panel assessed and supported this assumption (see 6.3, '*Non-cultural causes*').

2) *Since both parties are not trained on misunderstandings caused by a mutual assumption of a shared understanding of professional concepts / terminology, they are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Might it be that this type of misunderstandings effects project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences?*

In their analysis, several panel members distinguished different stages in communication and/or collaboration processes - *idea presentation stage - decision- making stage -*, and *implementation stage*- confirming that: misunderstandings caused by an assumed shared understanding are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Panel members admitted to often act from a monistic view on diversity, which was more evident in early stages of the collaboration process. In addition, the panel members claimed that colleagues often assume the expert's actions to be monistic (see 6.4, '*Views on diversity*').

These misunderstandings affect project / tasks implementation even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences. Misunderstandings caused by a *monistic view* in an early stage –*idea presentation*- indeed affect the project / task implementation stage negatively. However, in the implementation stage panel members declared to take cultural differences into account more easily and act from either a *relativistic point of view* or try to achieve *communicative moral universalism*. In spite of their efforts, the panel supported the assumption derived from the analysis of some panel members that

the monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization often causes misunderstandings in the decision phase of projects (see 6.4, 'Views on diversity').

## 6.1 Shared understanding

### Assumption 1:

*The mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share seems to be a very important cause of misunderstanding in the communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.*

The panel members used the LAC framework<sup>33</sup> (chapter 3) to analyse the misunderstandings described in their narratives. Differences in representation of 'social meaning of words or terminology' were recognized by 12 of the 14 respondents on the second survey round (86%) as cause of the misunderstandings occurred. Several panel members explicitly mentioned that this part of the analysis made them 'realize the importance of words / terms and the danger of taking action on the basis of a one-way interpretation of those words'. From the responses, it became clear that most misunderstandings are related to the use of professional concepts or terminology:

- *'The meaning on the term 'entrepreneurial management system' is different for staff on various levels in a public organization';*
- *'My definition of 'forest' seemed to differ from those of the students';*
- *'Their perception of the concept 'soil survey' was clearly different from mine';*
- *'The social meaning of the term 'Rational use of medicines' was different to the participating actors';*
- *'The word sustainable is often misunderstood'*

Two respondents (15%) noticed that not-language related presumptions, but non-verbal communication and situations, might create identical misunderstandings as referred to in the described analysis framework:

- *'The presumption of people wearing watches, and the presumption that people use the watch they wear.'*
- *'In this case it was non-verbal communication and not words that caused difficulties.'*

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<sup>33</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), "Linguistic Awareness of Cultures."

The responses (33%) on the *'choice of topic'* as given in the LAC Framework could also be categorized under this assumption due to the fact that taboo topics and topics with an *'(...) underlying history I was not aware of'* influence the mutual understanding regarding these topics.

The twelve (12) respondents validated the assumption (100%) regarding the importance of a shared understanding on concepts and terminology related to the profession. Of them 17% partly agreed, remarking that *'in most cases terminology is more or less internationalized'* or by insisting that *'it is essential that terminology be universally understood'*. In addition, the assumption in the LAC framework<sup>34</sup> that *'patterns / concepts are distinctly culture-specific'* has been criticized by 17% of the respondents:

- *'This is not only true for intercultural settings but also true during every day life in the Netherlands. Especially when meeting new people it often happens that one thinks to speak about the same though each one has his/her own expectations. I agree this becomes even more complex in intercultural settings where situations and background are even more diverse.'*
- *'Personally I think that these misunderstandings are normally not culturally related.'*

Though one respondent (9%) supports the culture specificity and adds *'institutional, political, and social difference'* emphasizing that *'institutional and political differences are the most important'*.

### **Assumption 2:**

*The status given to experts by other actors involved is not always the same as the status the expert believes himself/herself to have. This seems to be a cause of misunderstanding in communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.*

From the analysis of the panel members, it became clear that misunderstanding occurred because the actors have a different understanding of the *status* of the expert. In analysing their narratives, respondents emphasized the importance of a *shared understanding on status* under the following categories in the LAC framework: *'Functional varieties in*

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<sup>34</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), *"Linguistic Awareness of Cultures."*



*speech*’; *Speech acts*’; *High power – low power*’. Given these phenomena, the panel members were asked in the third round whether those topics should not be categorized under the title of *‘shared understanding*’. Since the panel reacted positively on this suggestion (see under 6.3), I decided to present the results of their analysis accordingly.

#### Functional varieties in speech:

57% of the respondents documented functional varieties in speech as plausible cause for the misunderstanding, mostly related to different perceptions of status attributed to leaders and foreigners but also to gender problems.

- *‘As international expert, communication partners often accord me a high status (...) they expect the expert ‘to teach them new knowledge / new approaches’.*

#### Speech acts:

The status given to experts by the other actors also plays a role in the interpretation of speech acts as was documented by 64% of the respondents:

- *Questions could have been interpreted as statements (a must).*
- *The Chinese Director translated my ‘opinions’ in ‘instructions’*
- *‘Perhaps the staff considered my demands to be a request.’*
- *‘Maybe they interpreted the information as an accusation in stead of an explanation.’*

#### High power versus low power:

It became clearly visible that experts tend to attribute a lower power to their own position in the organization than is attributed to them by the counterparts. Hofstede’s<sup>35</sup> dimension *‘high power versus low power*’ is recognized as possible cause of the misunderstanding by 79% of the respondents. In the presented cases, 21% of the experts seem to believe having a lower power than is attributed to them by colleagues:

- *It is possible misunderstandings took place because the women organizations attributed more power to the social team than the social team presumed.’*
- *Maybe there was a perception amongst the staff that I was high power because I was foreign expert. However, I considered myself an intermediary for the director.’*

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<sup>35</sup> Hofstede G (1991), *“Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen.”*

- *The project coordinator saw me as a higher official from the donor organization and therefore did not see it as appropriate to sit in the sand on the beach having a chat with people.*

However, the attribution of power to the expert also seemed to be related to the power attributed to the donor / client organization (mentioned by 14% of the respondents):

- *Ultimately the project was closed down by FAO due to misuse of vehicles by national staff and otherwise. This decision was taken without any consultation with the direct beneficiaries.*
- *Without taking in account the possibility of a smaller size project, the management team cancelled the project because it didn't fit their expectations to make the project smaller.*

Twelve (12) panel members (100%) validated the assumption that the status given to them by their colleagues is not always the same as they themselves believe to have (of which 17% partly):

- *I am aware of the high status given to me, the so-called "shadow of the leader."*
- *This is certainly the case, particularly when you get older and grey hair. This leads to situations where national colleagues see you as the messiah: what you say will be good, while you want a dialogue in order to come to the best solutions. This may lead to difficult and even conflict situations.*
- *Suggestions are accepted as the best solutions, because the "foreign expert" knows better; and it is often not seen as wise to disagree or to discuss with "the boss."*
- *What comes from far must be good. Coming all the way from the other side of the world, usually 'rich' countries, creates a certain status...initially. High status also raises high expectations. The higher the status, the deeper one can fall. It takes a while before status and expectations become more realistic. It's just a matter of getting to know and respect each other.*
- *I often felt as if I was given expert status that was not justified. Often being a "foreign expert" one is assumed to have experience or wisdom in local situations that can only be gained from field experience.*

## **6.2 'Often quoted' cultural differences**

### **Assumption 3:**

*'Directness versus indirectness' seems to be a very likely cause of misunderstanding due to the fact that expectations on directness/ indirectness differ in various situations.*

Using the LAC framework<sup>36</sup> to analyse the narratives, 93% of the respondents acknowledged *'directness versus indirectness'* as cause of misunderstanding in intercultural communication. After analysing the responses, it became clear that *'directness of the expert (team) versus indirectness of the other actors involved'* is evidently a cause of many misunderstandings. But in three (3) of the presented narratives, the misunderstandings described also showed that *'indirectness of information provided by the expert (team)'* was not expected by the other actors; due to his/ her status the other actor(s) clearly expected *'directness in information'*.

Of the twelve (12) panel members assessing the assumption, 92% agreed (of which 15% partly):

- *'They (the other actors) usually know about the outspokenness of the Dutch'!! On the other hand, it is sometimes difficult to estimate the degree of indirectness of the Chinese partner: is it 'indirectness', 'disinterest', or 'disagreement'?*
- *Chinese are often circuitous in the way they ask for things – directness can be construed as rude.*
- *In many cultures people try to avoid conflict situations and behave therefore less direct. It often happens that people say what an expert wants to hear, though they act in a different way.*
- *Directness can be understood as an "order"; when the subject/task is not understood well, it will result in "mistakes" or in delay and "doing nothing".*

One panel member (8%) did not validate the assumption stating that the degree of 'self – confidence' - not culture-specific- should also be taken into account:

- *Applying 'direct modes of communication' is in my opinion an expression of 'self-confidence'. When people are not sure of themselves in a certain situation or subject, they will apply an 'indirect mode of communication' (...) I would not qualify 'direct versus indirect communication' as a generalized cultural expectation.*

#### **Assumption 4:**

*Experts with dominant 'individualistic characteristics' working in cultures with dominant 'collectivistic characteristics' should pay attention to the impact of this cultural difference in communication and in collaborative relationships.*

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<sup>36</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), *"Linguistic Awareness of Cultures."*

In analysing their narratives, 64% of the respondents recognized this dimension of Hofstede<sup>37</sup> to be a cause of possible misunderstanding. In most cases, the individualistic culture of the expert did not match the collectivistic culture of the other actors involved; in some cases the importance of relationships (in group –out group) and loyalty play a role:

- *‘Sometimes, the co-facilitator considers the demanding organization as ‘in-group’ and me as distant expert.’*
- *For the project coordinator, probably relationships are more important than the task at hand (...). While I found the task (...) most important*
- *Chinese academics (...) tend to attach greater significance to crediting their teachers (out of a kind of filial loyalty) than those who have contributed intellectually to the work.*

Of the twelve (12) panel members assessing this assumption, 83% agreed. Two of them provided additional interesting information to this assumption relating ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’ to personalities instead of cultures:

- *The person with the collectivistic characteristics should also pay attention to the impact of this cultural difference in communication and collaboration with someone with individualistic characteristics.*
- *Dominant personalities and the cachet given to foreign experts can often be intimidating.*

Two respondents (17%) disagreed with the assumption stating that:

- *This dimension of Hofstede is too generalized. (...) Being Dutch, I should be individualistic but I think I am very collectivistic. On the other hand, I know many individualistic Chinese!*
- *Experts with the same cultural background can have ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivistic’ characteristics. Also in societies, which Hofstede would qualify as ‘dominant collectivistic characteristics’ there is a high esteem for ‘leadership’, which can have very ‘individualistic characteristics’. I disagree with these so-called cultural differences, because they have no operational meaning for me.*

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<sup>37</sup> Hofstede G (1991), “*Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen.*”

### 6.3 Non-cultural causes

#### Assumption 5:

*Experts should also keep in mind that misunderstandings can be created ‘on purpose’ to improve personal negotiating positions.*

In the analysis of their cases, 29% of the respondents pointed out that misunderstandings could be created ‘on purpose’ to improve personal negotiating positions:

- *Misunderstandings occur, when there are different interests and sometime people have interest in creating these misunderstandings to improve their negotiating position.’*

Of the twelve (12) panel members assessing this assumption, 67% agrees and 25 % of the respondents claim to agree partly with the assumption but from their observations I dare to conclude that they also agree on the phenomenon in intercultural collaboration, but are not happy with it:

- *Misunderstandings CAN be created ‘on purpose’ to improve personal negotiating positions in virtually every situation (...)*
- *Pretending not to understand, asking unexpected questions to provoke a reaction.*
- *This certainly occurred to me – as described for the manipulation of me by the Director to have me place pressure on the staff to provide better information for the donor report; this placed me in a very awkward position with my co-workers.*
- *The world of stakeholders is often limited and restricted to a local scale level, while experts travel all around the globe. Local politics are often important for stakeholders and usually difficult to understand for foreign experts, also due to lack of speaking the local language. It’s not so strange that experts are somehow ‘used’ by locals trying to improve the local position*
- *Yes, I agree, but then I wonder whether these are actually real misunderstandings, as one party who has created the misunderstanding knows it is actually not a misunderstanding. Then it is not a misunderstanding but manipulation.*
- *This is also not a cultural phenomenon. I experience it in a lot of negotiating situations, irrespective of culture.*
- *Yes, it happens but I will never create misunderstandings on purpose and will never suspect my colleague to do so! Consequently, in cases it does happen, I always have difficulties to recognize it.*

The panel member who disagreed (8%) commented:

- *I find this going a little too far within the framework of intercultural miscommunication (...) Trust should be the key and not creating a conflict for the sake of negotiations; you will spoil more than gain.*

Although the assumption strictly derived from the analysis of the narratives and is not related to the presented theory in the second round, the panel (94%) validated this assumption. The comment of the last panel member should absolutely be taken into account; mutual trust is indeed very important in (intercultural) collaboration, without trust shared understanding cannot be obtained.

#### **6.4 Views on diversity**

The analytical framework ‘Views on diversity’ (van Asperen 2006)<sup>38</sup> was used by 12 of the 14 respondents (83%) in the analysis of the misunderstandings described in their narratives. In the questionnaire of the second round, the LAC framework<sup>39</sup> proved to be concurrent with the framework of van Asperen. Obviously, to a great extent the LAC framework facilitated the panel members analysing their misunderstandings on cultural differences as possible causes to make the step to objectively analyse their own view on diversity by means of the framework of van Asperen: ‘(...) *this framework prepared me for the classification of the misunderstanding in the framework of van Asperen*’. In addition, several panel members claim that views of diversity held by the other actors involved was causing the misunderstanding.

In their analysis, several panel members distinguished different stages in communication and/ or collaboration processes - *idea presentation stage* - *decision making stage* - *implementation stage* - confirming that misunderstandings caused by a mutual assumption of a shared understanding of professional concepts / terminology are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process which negatively affects project / tasks implementations (second research question).

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<sup>38</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology*.”

<sup>39</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), “*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures*.”

The 12 respondents (100%) analysed their narratives by means of van Asperen's framework. Monistic and relativistic views seem to be the cause of misunderstanding in general (the '*implementation stage*'). However, 50% of the respondents analysing the views distinguished the '*idea presentation stage*' from the implementation phase and 50% of them analysed views in the '*decision-making stage*' as well. To assess the monistic and relativistic views on diversity as cause of misunderstanding in the different stages more deeply, I asked the panel to assess three different assumptions.

### **Assumption 6:**

*At early stages in the collaboration process – the 'idea presentation stage' and (early in) the 'implementation stage' – the monistic view of the experts and / or the attribution of a monistic view to the experts by their colleagues might be the cause of misunderstandings.*

Of the 12 panel members using the framework 'Views on diversity'<sup>40</sup> in analysing their narratives, 75% declared to have acted from a monistic view (in all three stages):

- '*This is our definition and they have to act on it*';
- '*This report was central to all funding and the information needed to be supplied – pronto!*'

In the stage of '*idea presentation*', 33% recognized their monistic view:

- '*(...) when introducing this term. (...) we were more monistic towards the intermediate staff!*'
- '*(...) my view regarding what is right to do on a field trip is monistic (...) as I did not communicate it to him (...) clearly from the beginning.*'

In addition, the *attribution of a monistic view to the experts by their counterparts* might be the cause of misunderstandings with counterparts ('self fulfilling prophecy') as sensed by 42% of the respondents. They claim that their colleagues assume their action to be monistic, even in cases, they themselves analyse their actions as relativistic. The attribution of a monistic view by their colleagues in the *idea presentation stage* is confirmed by 25% of the respondents.

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<sup>40</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), "*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*"

- *'They expected me to be as strict as their parents';*
- *'They think their way is better than ours.'*

Eleven (11) panel members assessed this assumption and 100% agreed of which 36% partly:

- *Yes, but this type of monism has probably little to do with 'acceptation of cultural differences' as stated by van Asperen. This monism comes from 'differences in knowledge / experiences'. In many cases the expert is invited because of his/her specific knowledge/experience and is expected to 'transfer knowledge' to counterparts. In cases the project is supposed to follow 'new (foreign) concepts / models' the monistic view of the expert might even be worse. The challenge is to facilitate / allow dialogues –true communicative action resulting in shared understanding- on new concepts / models / ideas and risking changes of concepts / models (enhancing 'ownership'!)*
- *Indeed, also the colleagues expect the expert to transfer the (foreign) concepts /models - (pre) judged as better than theirs-. Chinese used to ask us to 'bring them advanced technologies'!*

One respondent adds that *'(...) time constraints because of deadlines (...) may lead to a monistic view and approach'*.

#### **Assumption 7:**

*In the implementation stage, it seems easier for experts to accept the culture differences between them and colleagues than in other stages of the collaboration process. Actions from a relativistic view are observed and experiments with communicative moral universalism are possible.*

In analysing their view on diversity, 33% of the respondents distinguishing various stages of collaboration documented to have acted from a relativistic view in the *'implementation stage'*. Two of those panel members realize that they switch from a monistic to a relativistic view and visa versa and 25% claim to communicate strictly from a relativistic point of view:

- *Although it is far from certain that a shared understanding will be reached by knowledge transfer (since no two way communication), it is still a 'communicative action', which is not the case in relativistic views where both partners (pre) judge that the other can not understand it because coming from another culture!*
- *'I tried to respect their opinion and train them in democratic decisions'*
- *'The trainers and most of the participants had an open attitude to other culture'*



17% of the respondents claim to act relativistic in the *presentation of ideas*.

No relativistic views are analysed in the *decision-making process*.

Communication acts from a '*communicative moral universalism*' view -communication perceived as a learning process for all actors involved-, was claimed by 25% of the respondents. They describe how they try to avoid or overcome intercultural misunderstandings:

- *'Local communities have their own thoughts on tourism development. Through stakeholder workshops, we try to become aware of their needs and visions and try to integrate that within the final development strategy. It's something of both worlds.'*
- *Through inquiring, what the word implied in both cultures and social settings the misunderstanding was resolved. Eventually both the trainers and participants shared a belief in moral universalism that crosses religious ethnic national boundaries.*

Eleven (11) panel members assessed the assumption that in the implementation stage cultural differences are easier accepted and 91% of them agreed of which 30% partly:

- *It makes sense, as during the implementation you normally try to build up a good working and even personal relationship with your national and international colleagues. (...) However, I am less easy going towards my national and international colleagues within my own organization. There I take the corporate culture as reference and less their cultural background.*
- *During the presentation, terminology is often difficult; explanation follows during the implementation, so does the misunderstandings.*
- *The implementation stage is a couple of steps further in the process which means that a lot of differences have already been overcome.*
- *'Communicative moral universalism' can only be achieved through dialogue in which all actors 'perspectivize' and 'contrast cultures'! Creating 'shared understanding' implies 'taking risks' and 'willingness to defend the results' to tiers (including donor organizations)*
- *'Accepting cultural differences leading to relativism' resulting in non-communication or a blocked communication reinforces monistic action from the experts. These are the cases experts talk about in the 'Dutch clubs'!! Relativism has a lot to do –or results in- negative generalization of intercultural experiences!*
- *'Accepting cultural differences leading to relativism' can also result in 'going local': trying to respect / understand the maximum of the other culture, to convince the other of your good understanding, and...eventually adapt yourselves to the other culture trying to integrate! However, in my experience, 'going local' is not easily accepted by colleagues and might even lead to mistrust.*
- *This could also mean implementation without shared understanding, just 'pushing it through'.*

Some interesting other remarks:

- *Is it “easier for experts to accept” the differences, or easier “to detect” differences?*
- *I am not so sure whether that is always the case. I think it very much depends on the expert’s attitude to what extent he is willing to learn from the implementation stage and therefore to learn from the views/ideas/perceptions from the other party. If the expert does not have an open attitude then also in the implementation stage, the expert will not accept the cultural differences.*

One respondent (9%) disagrees with the assumption emphasizing that this type of misunderstanding should be overcome in earlier stages:

- *(For science projects) cultural differences should be overcome at initial planning and idea presentation stages. It is too late at the implementation stage.*

### **Assumption 8:**

*The monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization might be a cause of misunderstandings in the ‘decision-making stage’.*

A monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization in the ‘decision-making’ is recognized to be the cause of misunderstandings by 17% of the panel members in the second round:

- *‘In case the demanding organization/ donor does not accept my proposal I do not accept the contract’; ‘I think that most (inter) national experts (including demanding organizations) act from a monistic view.’*
- *(The organization) also had a monistic view: operating at a distance and decisions taken based on reports.’*
- *‘(...) the management team cancelled the project because it didn’t fit their expectations to make the project smaller’.*

Eleven (11) panel members assessed this assumption in the third round, all (100%) agreed, of which 36% partly:

- *Yes, quite possible. Especially in the case you are here in your own country behind your desk, this risk is rather big, especially if the person of the (donor) organization concerned is not willing to learn / not has an open attitude and does not visit the counterpart organization in the other country and discuss the issues thoroughly. When you are far away from where it happens (in another country), behind a desk, this risk described in the statement above becomes bigger.*
- *In particular donors, but also the employer (represented by the management team), have a clear view what they want and how to achieve this. Donors and companies have their policies and mission*

- statements leading to a monistic view, which are often not clear to the recipient party. This may lead to serious misunderstandings and unfortunate decisions.*
- *Donor organizations have their own 'membership base' to which they have to report. They are represented by the donor organization (often through the management team), but are not taking really part as a stakeholder in the project negotiations.*
  - *(..) management teams are also often using the 'donor organization' as a 'scapegoat' during decision-making. This can indeed create misunderstanding if you have technically reached a 'mutual assumption of shared understanding' with counterparts.*

## 7. Set of recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural settings and the use of the analytic frameworks; result of the expert survey

The assumptions (see chapter 6) and the recommendation formulated under 7.2 resulted from the analysis by means of the framework for cultural / linguistic differences (Müller-Jacquier<sup>41</sup>) linked with the *monistic* and *relativistic* views on diversity (van Asperen<sup>42</sup>), all focusing to detect *causes* of misunderstandings. However, the framework of van Asperen (2006), as well as the 3 steps outlined by ten Thije (2003) is developed to better analyse the *interaction between actors*. In case communicating actors follow the 3 steps outlined by ten Thije and achieve *contrasting cultures*, they also achieve *communicative moral universalism view* as described by van Asperen. Both aim to create *shared understanding* between actors in the communication process.

After a short evaluation of the proceedings to avoid or go beyond misunderstandings (7.1), the set of related recommendations –result of the expert survey- will be presented ( 7.2). Recommendations to avoid or overcome misunderstandings are described under 7.3 and the expert’s recommendations for the improvement of the analytic frameworks under 7.4.

### 7.1 Evaluation of the proceedings to avoid or go beyond misunderstandings

The panel was invited to reflect on their narratives by using the 3 steps procedure of ten Thije<sup>43</sup> aiming to avoid or to go beyond misunderstandings. In their reflection, panel members were invited to analyse in which step of the verbalizing process the misunderstandings occurred.

#### Step 1: Generalizing

*The actors verbalize their own expectations as realizations of standard solutions of their own cultural group*

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<sup>41</sup> Müller- Jacquier, B (2004), “*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*”

<sup>42</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*”

<sup>43</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), “*Perspectivising intercultural discourse.*”

Twelve (12) panel members (100%) identified causes of their misunderstandings in step 1 –*generalizing*- of the verbalizing process:

- *Eventual comments on (or simple acceptance of) the proposal are a first act of generalizing by all actors.*
- *'The misunderstanding started in the step 1 (generalizing) based on 'Dutch directness' versus 'Chinese indirectness' during the first year of the project.*
- *'Most probably the misunderstanding occurred during the instructions/teaching period.'*
- *This may relate to the point about professional colleagues making too many assumptions of similarity.'*
- *The generalization on both sides became apparent in the discussions when it became obvious that their reaction to what was being said or proposed was quite different that we had expected*
- *The misunderstanding (...) was the result of the generalization from the trainer that an exercise could be universally applied to other cultures.*
- *We used the term 'rational drug use' as mentioned in documents and as used by other experts in a generalized way.*

### Step 2: Perspectivising

*Actors anticipate possible differences with the standard problems and solutions of other cultural groups; they relate their knowledge to those of others by taking their cultural standards into account. 'Perspectivising' works as a result of the speaker monitoring the hearer's reactions in discourse. In case the speaker spots (re)actions from the hearer proving that his knowledge on the social reality is not being understood, he / she can adapt his speech.'*

17% of the respondents claimed reaching the step of *perspectivising*, but admitted to return in a later stage to *generalizing*:

- *'The misunderstanding occurred when introducing an 'entrepreneurial management system' using only the 'perspectives' of the European consultants and the Burkinabé management team (step 1, partly 2).*
- *Because the social team failed to 'contrast cultures' when the women organizations were *perspectivising* (Step 2) their perspectives were generalized, going back to step 1.*

### Step 3: Contrasting cultures

*The speaker enables the hearer to compare the speaker's cultural standards with his own and attain an adequate interpretation of the discourse. Finally they will attain intercultural understanding.*

None of the panel members analysed misunderstanding while contrasting cultures.

## **7.2 Recommendation to avoid or go beyond misunderstandings**

Based on their analysis in which step of the verbalizing process the misunderstanding occurred, panel members were invited to assess what they could have done to avoid the misunderstanding. The provided suggestions below enabled me to formulate a recommendation, validated by the panel members in the third round of the research.

### Suggestions reinforcing generalizing:

The provided suggestions (by 50% of the respondents) to avoid misunderstandings focus to *generalise* even more. In addition, 33% of their suggestions show a monistic point of view:

- *Ensuring that the Director saw or heard my request to the staff*
- *Send a stronger message and outline specifically the type of information required*
- *'The misunderstanding could have been avoided if I had accompanied the team right in the beginning of the field work phase to make sure that my instructions had been understood.'*
- *'The implementation in the Moslem community could have been successful, if the leadership was informed first and when we( as non-Moslem ?) could have convinced them of the religious value of high standards of hygiene.'*
- *'Implementation target should have been discussed in more detail.'*

17% of the respondents provided suggestions to avoid misunderstandings from a relativistic point of view:

- *'Adjust your expectations'*
- *'Be aware of the fact that your moral values are cultural specific'*
- *I should have been careful to inform on all steps, so they could see I worked according to their policy*

### Suggestions reinforcing *perspectivizing*:

The suggestions of 25% of the respondents could be classified in step 2 of the verbalizing process. Though, the suggestions of one respondent show a monistic point of view:

- *'Define forest clearly' and 'explain the need more clearly and project the results'*

Two respondents provided suggestions from a relativistic point of view:

- *'By first trying to find what the usually practices in the culture of the participants and then decide if the exercises would be applicable in the existing form or in an altered form one would reduce the possibility of being take by surprise'.*
- *Better I discussed before the field trip started with the project coordinator more clearly about the field trip schedule in order to get a better understanding how the schedule was planned. Then it would have been easier to come to a compromise.*

### Suggestions to achieve *contrasting cultures*:

The suggestions listed below have been formulated by 58% of the panel members from a communicative moral universalism point of view:

- *'After having clear what the women organizations had in mind, the perspective of the management team could have been changed (as well as the perspective of the women organizations) based on shared understanding of the situation → contrasting cultures.*
- *'Stakeholder discussion on the practical meaning of new systems to be introduced. This is what you called (perhaps) a 'shared understanding', taking into account different interests.'*
- *'Developing a common understanding of the situation 'after the project' is an important step, identifying the institutional arrangements to assure the sustainability of the project results.'*
- *We should have tried to define the term 'rational drug use' together, taking in account their cultural backgrounds (...) In this way one could say that trainer and trainees are 'contrasting cultures' by defining the term used during the training together. There is a mutual understanding on which base the training can then proceed.'*

**Recommendation 1:**

*Experts should find means to reach Step 2 –‘perspectivizing’- or Step 3 –‘contrasting cultures’- in order to achieve a shared understanding of the working concepts. These should involve all actors (stakeholders) in the process of anticipating possible differences among the standard solutions of other cultural groups. This will help to contrast cultures, and achieve a ‘communicative moral universalism’ point of view.*

Eleven (11) panel members assessed this recommendation, all (100%) agreed, of which 18% partly:

- *To ensure that the expert will do this during his work it is very important to make the expert aware of this before he sent abroad.*
- *The frameworks are of interest to be used during such learning processes in a project organization. They are now still too theoretical and it would be important to get a type of manual on how to use these frameworks when facilitating ‘stakeholders’ workshops’.*
- *Contrasting cultures in step 3 and further in the process may not avoid misunderstanding. For instance comparing the various cultures in dialogues with your international colleagues may be seen as promoting your own, while highlighting the shortcomings of the other. Yes, all have to accept that this planet is inhabited by a variety of people, all with their own values and norms. But these should be accepted and taken into account while formulating and implementing.*
- *This asks for patience and time, things which, in practice, tend to be limited.*

**7.3 Recommendation to avoid or overcome misunderstandings in intercultural communication**

Based on the assumptions the following recommendation to overcome misunderstandings was formulated and validated by eleven (11) panel members.

**Recommendation 2:**

*Even if the ‘idea presentation stage’ is characterized by a monistic point of view, during the ‘implementation stage’, experts should enable learning processes for all actors involved that tend to avoid or overcome intercultural misunderstandings (e.g. by means of facilitated stakeholder participation).*

All respondents (100%) fully agreed on this recommendation, but question whether they are able to facilitate such learning processes:



- *Indeed ‘multiple stakeholders’ participation’ is the newest trend, but...are experts trained in facilitation of interactive participation / dialogues in communication processes? To date, stakeholders’ participation is often limited to ‘consultation’ after which decisions are taken by experts and / or donor organizations!*
- *I completely agree that experts should enable learning processes. However, an expert will only do that if he/she is open for learning him/herself and open to accept other ideas/views, etc. If this is not there, then there is no reason for the expert to facilitate such learning processes as he/she thinks: my view is the best and the only existing one.*
- *Theoretically I agree, but how to effectuate this practically?*
- *Most projects have a so-called ‘Inception Phase’ at the start of the implementation phase, what can be used for that purpose. The period is often too short, because the local counterpart wants to start implementation when the foreign expert is still busy to get himself acquainted to the new situation. How much time do you need for a reciprocal learning process and how can you negotiate to get this time and the funds?*
- *But like what I said earlier, your relationship with in particular the national staff is crucial. A learning process can only take place in an atmosphere of trust and respect for each others personality and culture.*
- *This seems to be obvious, not only for intercultural situations but for any learning situation. However, as pointed out earlier, there is a need to overcome the respect and often uncritical acceptance of “expert” points of view. Often locals are too embarrassed or intimidated to query what they don’t understand. The end result of this is that projects are not done properly; in my view the only way to overcome this is by close involvement during the initial project and reporting phases.*

As described under 6.1, on several occasions, panel members observed that they often feel obliged –by the donor organization, the company, or the management team- to introduce working concepts of their own cultural group in an intercultural situation, resulting in misunderstandings from a *monistic point of view*. Some claim that time constraints and deadlines hardly permit to spend time on creation of *shared understanding* or *communicative moral universalism* –the third view described by van Asperen<sup>44</sup>.

#### **7.4 Recommendations for the use of the analytical frameworks**

Based on the comments of the panel members, I could present the following recommendations for the use of the analytical frameworks for validation in the third round.

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<sup>44</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*”

### **Recommendation 3:**

*The LAC framework<sup>45</sup> is too detailed: ‘social meaning of words’ (a) is analysed separately from ‘speech acts’ (b), ‘choice of topic’ (c), ‘functional varieties of speech’ (d), and ‘high power versus low power’ (e). To make it more functional, these five topics could be combined under the heading ‘social meaning of words and situations’.*

Ten (10) panel members assessed this recommendation, 60% agreed and 10% partly agreed:

- *But I needed the LAC framework for recognizing my monistic view! You might regroup the listed items under ‘social meaning of words’, but still provide the explanations of the under items in the framework so that is taken into account in assessing the misunderstanding.*
- *The LAC framework (a-e) is too much related to language. Communication is so much more than language.*
- *Strongly agree. To be honest I found this framework very confusing and perhaps complicating situations unnecessarily. For my experiences it was often difficult to pigeonhole possible misunderstanding into the above detailed categories. Most people working in intercultural situations and development projects are practically orientated – the simpler the framework the better.*
- *Indeed a more simple language is needed to get a ‘shared understanding’ with counterparts on the importance to invest in such activity to avoid misunderstandings.*
- *This gives a more clear perspective to avoid misunderstanding, not only through the wordings but also through a shared understanding of the underlying institutional and political situation. Even if you don’t agree with the institutional and political arrangements, you have to accept that your counterparts have to take them into account.*
- *Agree with combining (a), (b), (c) and (e) which seem to overlap. But (f) seems to contain a lot of different ideas.*

30% of the respondents disagreed on the recommendation:

- *I do not agree, because all the aspects mentioned in this framework can play a role in a misunderstanding. However, you have to make those aware who use the framework that they will not try to define every aspect of the framework as a cause for the misunderstanding. All the aspects may be a cause; it is not necessarily so that every aspect really is a cause. For example, when I did do the second round I found myself to try to ensure that every aspect mentioned in the framework will be a cause for the misunderstanding. However, that is not the reality!*

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<sup>45</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), “Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.”

- *The term 'Analytical' means that one separates a topic into its constituents. It makes sense to create awareness of the constituents and that should be maintained in the LAC framework. Combining the 5 topics under one heading (while maintaining the analytical part, I suppose!) is cosmetic and not particularly meaningful.*
- *Details within this framework are not a problem, on the contrary. Like I said in round II the list is even not complete. You might make a distinction between social meaning between words and situations, but still you have to come forward with topics covering the situation.*

#### **Recommendation 4:**

*The LAC framework<sup>46</sup> is too focused on verbal communication; more attention should be paid to analysis of non-verbal communication/ behaviour.*

Eleven (11) panel members assessed this recommendation, 100% agreed, of which 55% partly:

- *Non-verbal communication may have in one culture a completely different meaning than in another. Moreover, most of our communication happens through non-verbal, not verbal.*
- *Hold in mind the indirectness of some cultures, where messages are not transmitted through words, but in behavior.*
- *Non-verbal communication/behavior is often more important than verbal communication particularly in the Asian society.*
- *Most of Hofstede's dimensions are 'behavioral', as is 'directness – indirectness'!!*
- *It is difficult to discuss / exchange on non-verbal communication / behavior in work settings, because serious analysis could easily lead to a sensitivity training (without qualified trainers). If 'non-verbal communication / behavior' is an important problem in the project group, perhaps a 'team-building exercise' could be tried.*
- *The LAC is about language (= verbal communication), isn't it, and as such does not claim to include non-verbal communication/ behaviour. It seems logical to me that it should be complemented by an analysis of non-verbal communication/ behaviour.*
- *Non-verbal communication mostly tells you the truth, but not everyone is able to read it.*

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<sup>46</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), "Linguistic Awareness of Cultures."

### **Recommendation 5:**

*Creating shared understanding among all actors involved is important for good (intercultural) communication; once the importance of perspectivising becomes clear for all actors, both frameworks - 'Views on diversity'<sup>47</sup> and 'Three sequential steps'<sup>48</sup> - are very useful to work towards shared understanding in intercultural communication based on 'contrasting cultures' or 'communicative moral universalism'.*

Eleven (11) panel members assessed this recommendation, 91% agreed, of which 30% partly:

- *Yes, I think through perspsectivising you are opening yourself towards new and other ideas, views, etc. which is the beginning of shared understanding.*
- *This is a learning process applicable to all stakeholders, but you'll need a methodology.*
- *This seems to be obvious; in any group venture (not just intercultural ones) there must be a shared understanding of perspectives to enable effective outcomes.*
- *For experts often facing problems in intercultural communication the frameworks could be helpful to overcome or prevent these problems. The frameworks should however become better applicable and easier to understand.*

One (1) panel member (9%) could not answer this question due to the following reason:

- *I do not know what to respond here. I agree with the first statement (very clear), while the second one makes it all too scientific (qualify communication, so it fits in a box). Creating shared understanding is important and can only be achieved by having an open mind and high acceptance rate (you may like the other culture, but you may also not. In the latter case you have to accept it though).*

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<sup>47</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), "Intercultural Communication & Ideology."

<sup>48</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), "Perspectivising intercultural discourse."

### **Recommendation 6:**

*To understand the terminology of all three frameworks one should have more knowledge of the underpinning theories. A training workshop (preferably in an intercultural setting, with colleagues) to run through the theory and to hold dialogue on own and others' perspectives with people from different cultures would give better results.*

Ten (10) panel members assessed this recommendation, 80% agreed of which 25% partly:

- *Yes, I agree. When I read the frameworks at first, I found them very theoretical. A practical training with people from different cultures will make the things more practical and makes it much easier for participants / experts to learn to use the concepts.*
- *Indeed, you need more knowledge of the theories on which the frameworks are based. And yes, a training or workshop in an intercultural setting seems to make sense.*
- *I don't know if such trainings already exist but it's always good to hear experiences from others and to be aware in advance on potential hurdles in intercultural communication.*
- *The underpinning theories need to be translated in simple practical language. Most important however is the practical application in the work situation.*
- *Theory could be helpful, but I'm not sure we need theoretical knowledge so much as making the terms more tangible, e.g. with some simple examples to clarify the concepts.*
- *Maybe, a short introduction on the theories (in the form of 'hand outs') is sufficient to facilitate a 'learning by doing' process! An intercultural setting should be the ideal!*
- *Agree with the "preferably" part, but even without colleagues, or in an "intercultural" setting, it could help – I dare say the respondents to this exercise could have helped one another with the analyses.*
- *This maybe could be done in training before his departure to the country where he/she will work. If the expert is not aware that he/she has to find means to reach step 2 by involving all actors in the above mentioned process, the chance will be very big that he/she will not even try to find the means.*

Two (2) panel members (20%) disagreed:

- *Intercultural communication is not a goal, it's only a means which allows you to reach another goal.*
- *Perhaps this is of value for people assessing such theories, but as pointed out earlier, most people involved in development work and intercultural situations are looking for practical, rather than theoretical outcomes. I would have little interest yet more workshops – I would, however, value practical examples from people with extensive field experience.*

## 8. Evaluation of the research, conclusions and recommendations

### 8.1 Introduction

The research objective:

*Facilitating a well-structured opinion forming process among western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries resulting in a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication.*

In the frame of this research project, the objective was made operational through the following steps:

- 1) *Identification of current misunderstandings in intercultural collaboration settings caused by -the often quoted- cultural differences between the communicating parties, as well as those caused by a mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding a 'shared understanding' on professional concepts and terminology;*
- 2) *Formulation of a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings.*

With this research project I searched to test the following hypothesis:

*Misunderstandings in the intercultural professional field occur because of sharing professional backgrounds; actors might assume a shared understanding on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly in implementing their tasks*

To test this hypothesis the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) *Besides the often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations, what is the role of the mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share?*

2) *Since both parties are not trained on misunderstandings caused by a mutual assumption of a shared understanding of professional concepts / terminology, they are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Might it be that this type of misunderstandings effects project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences?*

## **8.2 Evaluation of the research project**

Failure of communication between professionals in an intercultural setting - *misunderstanding* or *pseudo-understanding*- has been chosen as a starting point for this research in order to develop *'a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings'*.

### **8.2.1 Documentary study**

A documentary study of the earlier composed personal data base resulted in the conclusion that the notion of *shared understanding* as introduced by Habermas -*'system'* versus *'life world'*- could be a valuable reference for this research. The importance of a shared understanding regarding new concepts and (professional) terminology should be emphasized through facilitated *dialogues* in intercultural communication / collaboration settings.

From the documentary study regarding *intercultural training*, I concluded that in addition to competences, abilities and skills, intercultural training and knowledge transfer on *cultural differences*, knowledge on *communication* with an emphasis on *misunderstanding* should be included. Consequently, my search leads me to the development of new methodologies for intercultural communication training emphasizing *communication, dialogue* and *shared understanding*.

Three authors - Müller-Jacquier, van Asperen and ten Thije- provided theories that I value of great use for the development of a new training methodology for intercultural training giving *communication* the place it merits. In the expert survey, we explored these theories

and the accompanying analytical frameworks, resulting in a coherent set of assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication, probably of great value for the development of a new type of training: *communication specific intercultural training*.

### **8.2.2 Expert survey**

For the expert survey -a Delphi method-, panel members were selected by applying the following criteria:

- Western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries, and / or
- Western experts involved in training people in (or from) developing countries.

Through various channels, 54 experts were approached of which 25 (46%) showed an initial interest to participate in the survey. Their interest sustains the operational importance of the research subject. Mainly because of time constraints, only 19 of the interested experts (75%) participated in the first survey round hence forming the expert panel for the survey. I did not receive any message of the remaining invited experts, so I am not sure on the reasons why they did not react on the questionnaires. In total, 32 narratives were provided describing experienced misunderstandings in intercultural settings.

The panel members all claim having more than 5 years working experience in developing countries and a majority even more than 19 years. Consequently, most panel members are aged over 40 years old. I didn't observe specific age related differences in the cases presented. However, some older participants observed that the misunderstandings they described dated from long ago; they obviously learned from their earlier experiences and adapted their communication approach accordingly.

The second survey round in which each expert had to analyse his / her narratives by means of the selected analytical frameworks was very time consuming. Nevertheless, 74% of the panel members participated. Their analysing work enabled me to formulate a



draft set of ‘*basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings*’ to be commented and validated by the panel in the third survey round in which 63% of the panel members participated.

The relatively high response to this time-consuming research shows the importance of the subject and indicates the need of further research on the *role of misunderstandings between professionals in intercultural settings*, becoming more and more important in a globalising world.

### **8.3 Conclusions with regard to the results of the expert survey**

The panel supports the idea that a mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share is indeed an important cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication / collaboration situations. However, institutional situations, personal professional attitudes and interests, and the organizational status related to the positions / functions the different actors hold also affect the meaning actors attach to concepts and terminologies. Consequently, creating shared understanding on concepts and terminologies with all actors concerned (internal and external stakeholders) could positively affect various organizational issues. The concept of a *facilitated dialogue* to reach *shared understanding* between actors / stakeholders has been appreciated as a potential approach to improve the quality of intercultural communication. In the frame of this research, it was not possible to measure the role of mutual influences.

As a result of the findings described above, the conclusions in this chapter will be presented under different headings subsequently emphasising the importance of shared understanding on concepts and terminology (8.3.1), on the role and responsibilities of the actors (8.3.2), to enhance (intercultural) communication / collaboration (8.3.3), and regarding different interests / negotiating positions (8.3.4).

### **8.3.1 Shared understanding of concepts and / or terminology**

In the third round, all respondents (100%) validated the assumption:

*The mutual assumption of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share, seems to be a very important cause of misunderstanding in the communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.*

Given the relatively high response on the research subject in general and the validation of the assumption above by 100% of the respondents, I dare to conclude that the hypothesis of my research is valid:

*Misunderstanding in the intercultural professional field occur because of sharing professional backgrounds; actors might assume a shared understanding on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly in implementing their task.*

The operational meaning of (professional) concepts and terminology seems to be situation specific and solutions have to be found taking into account the context in which communication takes place (e.g. internal-, external-, institutional-, corporate-, political context).

### **8.3.2 Shared understanding on the role and responsibilities of the actors**

All respondents (100%) in the third survey round validated the assumption:

*The status given to experts by other actors involved is not always the same as the status the expert believes himself / herself to have. This seems to be a cause of misunderstanding in communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.*

The validation of this assumption should be evaluated in combination with the two assumptions below taking into account situation-specific prejudices related to (intercultural) collaboration. These prejudices can be explained by unclear organization forms –positions and functions- and (in)formal power structures.

The next assumption, validated by all respondents (100%), expresses similar prejudicial characteristics:

*At early stages in the collaboration process- the 'idea presentation stage' and (early) in the 'implementation stage'- the monistic view of the experts and/or the attribution of a monistic view to the experts by their colleagues might be a cause of misunderstanding.*

A monistic view on diversity is recognized by the panel and is most probably related to the –also 100% validated- assumption:

*The monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization might be a cause of misunderstandings in the 'decision making' stages.*

All experts are working for -or are financed by- western organizations to achieve the organization's objectives. Most experts claim to be seen by their colleagues as dependent on or representing those western organizations. Consequently, colleagues attribute the expert with a status, he / she believes not to have.

Solutions have to be found in a situation-specific setting, taking into account the important role external stakeholders play in (intercultural) misunderstandings. Further institutional research might be interesting concerning communication systems like 'distance communication' between the headquarters and the field including 'delegated management'. Different communication systems will be needed for e.g. bilateral and multilateral donor organisations, profit and non-profit organizations, etc.

### **8.3.3 Shared understanding to enhance (intercultural) communication / collaboration**

The panel assessed and validated two assumptions regarding possible cultural differences - *directness vs. indirectness* (Muller-Jacquier<sup>49</sup>) and *individualistic vs. collectivistic* (Hofstede<sup>50</sup>):

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<sup>49</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), "*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*"

<sup>50</sup> Hofstede G (1991), "*Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen.*"

*Directness versus indirectness' seems to be a very likely cause of misunderstanding due to the fact that expectations on directness / indirectness differ in various situations (validated by 91% of the respondents)*

*Experts with dominant 'individualistic characteristics' working in cultures with dominant 'collectivistic characteristics' should pay attention to the impact of this cultural difference in communication and in collaborative relationships (validated by 82% of the respondents)*

However, it has been observed that these differences are not necessarily culture related; they also occur between individuals sharing the same cultural background and could be personal characteristics. Explaining misunderstandings as caused by cultural differences - explanatory model- might restrain actors from assessing the role personal characteristics play in the occurred misunderstanding.

However, the period in which experts collaborate with colleagues in an intercultural setting seems to play an important role. Misunderstandings -caused by cultural differences or personal characteristics- seem to be temporarily, given that 91% of the respondents agreed on the following assumption:

*In the implementation stage, it seems easier for the experts to accept culture differences between them and colleagues than in other stages of the collaboration process. Actions from a relativistic view are observed and experiments with communicative moral universalism are possible.*

In setting time schedules, one should take into account that actors need time to get to know his or her place in the new (foreign) organization and / or to integrate new foreign experts in the working situation.

### **8.3.4 Shared understanding regarding different interests / negotiating positions**

In assessing the next assumption, the panel expressed a lot of mixed feelings, though only one respondent (8%) disagreed:

*Experts should also keep in mind that misunderstandings can be created ‘on purpose’ to improve personal negotiating positions.*

The idea that misunderstandings could be created for personal interests received a negative connotation by the experts, arguing that collaboration has to be based on mutual trust. However, the fact that the assumption has been validated by 82% of the respondents, favours the idea that negotiations should be preceded by an inventory of the different interests existing within the organization as well as in its environment. A facilitated stakeholders analysis in which all interest groups take part might be a good option to achieve shared understanding and create mutual trust during negotiation processes.

## **8.4 Recommendations with regard to the results of the expert survey**

In the third survey round, the panel validated six recommendations. The results of the documentary study – especially the analytical frameworks of Muller-Jacquier<sup>51</sup>, van Asperen<sup>52</sup>, and ten Thije<sup>53</sup> - formed an integral part of the assessed recommendations. In the second round, the panel used an analytical framework -a combination of the three- to analyse their narratives. This framework –after improvement based on the comments received- could be an important training or individual reflection tool in facilitated learning processes aiming to improve intercultural communication.

The terminology used in the framework, as well as in the underpinning theories, need to be well understood by people willing to use the tool for individual reflection and / or to facilitate learning situations. 80% of the respondents agreed on the recommendation

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<sup>51</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), “*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*”

<sup>52</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*”

<sup>53</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), “*Perspectivising intercultural discourse.*”

below and 45% of the respondents added that a practical training is needed before being able to use these concepts in an intercultural situation.

*To understand the terminology of all three frameworks one should have more knowledge of the underpinning theories. A training workshop (preferably in an intercultural setting, with colleagues) to run through the theory and to hold dialogue on own and others' perspectives with people from different cultures would give better results.*

I recommend that intercultural communication training to prepare experts for their work abroad, should include training in facilitating skills to hold dialogues on own and others' perspectives with people from different cultures. The improved analytical framework can be introduced as a tool to overcome, avoid, or go beyond misunderstandings in intercultural situations.

In addition, experts should be trained in the ability of formulating situation specific communication strategies. Such strategies should take into account the conclusions regarding the importance of shared understanding regarding concepts and terminology, roles and responsibilities, enhancement of (intercultural) communication / collaboration, and different existing interests / negotiating positions.

According to the panel, the need for extension of such intercultural training to all stakeholders, facilitating true dialogues is recommended. Such a situation specific training would enhance shared understanding between all actors and stakeholders. Reaching shared understanding on the professional concepts with its institutional and collaborative consequences will be the objective of such training. The training design needs further attention.

*Creating shared understanding among all actors involved is important for good (intercultural) communication; once the importance of perspectivising becomes clear for all actors, both frameworks - 'Views on diversity',<sup>54</sup> and 'Three sequential steps',<sup>55</sup> - are very useful to work towards shared understanding in intercultural*

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<sup>54</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), "Intercultural Communication & Ideology."

<sup>55</sup> Thijs, J.D. ten (2004), "Perspectivising intercultural discourse."

*communication based on ‘contrasting cultures’ or ‘communicative moral universalism’.* (91% of the respondents agreed on this recommendation, of which 30% partly)

For the development of situation specific (intercultural) communication strategies, the following recommendations are also of interest:

*Even if the ‘idea presentation stage’ is characterized by a monistic point of view, during the ‘implementation stage’, experts should enable learning processes for all actors involved that tend to avoid or overcome intercultural misunderstandings (e.g. by means of facilitated stakeholder participation).* (Validated by 100% of the respondents).

*Experts should find means to reach Step 2 –‘perspectivizing’- or Step 3 –‘contrasting cultures’- in order to achieve a shared understanding of the working concepts. These should involve all actors (stakeholders) in the process of anticipating possible differences among the standard solutions of other cultural groups. This will help to contrast cultures, and achieve a ‘communicative moral universalism’ point of view.* (Validated by 100% of the respondents, of which 18% partly).

The LAC framework<sup>56</sup> should be completed with elements assessing non-verbal communication and situations to make it applicable for a more general use. According to some of the respondents, the topics to be analysed are too detailed. Though, others valued the detailing helpful. I valued the LAC framework of great interest in intercultural communication training organized for trainees sharing the same professional background but coming from and different cultures. Analyzing own misunderstandings using the LAC framework creates the possibility to look at the misunderstanding from different perspectives.

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<sup>56</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004), “*Linguistic Awareness of Cultures.*”

The knowledge of the existence of these different perspectives facilitates the analysis using the frameworks of van Asperen<sup>57</sup> and ten Thije<sup>58</sup> necessary to overcome or even avoid future misunderstandings.

Furthermore, I would like to state that I believe this research to be not only of value in training preparing experts for leaving their home country to work and live abroad, but also for ‘in-company’ communication training in companies where intercultural settings exist. In organizations characterized by diversity, similar misunderstandings could possibly occur caused by an assumed shared understanding between colleagues and between colleagues and external counterparts. Therefore, I recommend ‘in-company’ communication training for such organizations, emphasizing the use of the 3 sequential steps designed by Jan ten Thije resulting in the achievement of a ‘communicative moral universalism’ point of view as mentioned by van Asperen.

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<sup>57</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), “*Intercultural Communication & Ideology.*”

<sup>58</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), “*Perspectivising intercultural discourse.*”



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## ANNEXES

- 01) Research strategy
- 02) Invitation for expert panel
- 03) Questionnaire 01
- 04) Synthesis report first round
- 05) Questionnaire 02
- 06) Synthesis report second round
- 07) Questionnaire 03
- 08) Time schedule

Research strategy

**Title:**            **The importance of ‘shared understanding’ regarding professional concepts and terminology in intercultural collaboration settings**

*Researcher:*    Marije Busstra; University of Utrecht, Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, master Communication Studies (with a focus on the intercultural communication courses offered at the university).

*Supervisor:*    Robert Maier; University of Utrecht, Interdisciplinary Social Sciences

## **1.        Objective**

*Facilitating a well-structured opinion forming process among western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries resulting in a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication.*

In the frame of this research project, the objective will be made operational through the following steps:

- a)    Identification of current misunderstandings in intercultural collaboration settings caused by -the often quoted- cultural differences between the communicating parties, as well as those caused by a mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding a ‘shared understanding’ on professional concepts and terminology.
- b)    Formulation of a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings.

## **2.        Research issues and questions**

### *2.1    Motivation*

Experts going abroad are trained in intercultural differences, in the different encounters with various identities. But once abroad they get in contact with one identical identity: the work field to which they all belong. The mutual assumption of a shared understanding of professional concepts / terminology could be the pitfall for misunderstanding when one goes abroad for his/ her work.

In my opinion, a misunderstanding occurs in situations where people are no longer aware of the cultural differences because they find themselves in a situation with someone with the same identity. One assumes a situation of mutual understanding. I argue that these (mutual) assumptions risk causing major misunderstandings.

This could happen for example in case the expert travelling abroad finds himself in the situation of communicating with people from another culture but in his / her working field.

## 2.2. *Research issue*

Many research projects have been conducted focussing on the need for intercultural training to prepare people leaving their home country to work (and live) abroad. In general, the conclusions are that intercultural training is a must.

Intercultural training, among other topics, implies intercultural communication. Mostly, in training as well as in research projects, the phenomena ‘misunderstanding’ in intercultural communication is linked with cultural differences.

I question whether in work situations misunderstanding occurs because of the often quoted cultural differences between the communicating parties (e.g. Hofstede’s dimensions) or occurs because of the mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding concepts and terminology related to their work: since they share their professional background, they might assume a *shared understanding* on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly to implement their tasks.

## 2.3. *Research questions*

- Besides the often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations, what is the role of the mutual assumption of *shared understanding* regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share?
- Since both parties are not trained on misunderstandings caused by a mutual assumption of a *shared understanding* of professional concepts / terminology, they are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Might it be that this type of misunderstandings effect project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences?

## 3. **Methodology**

### 3.1. *Principles Delphi-method*

The research will be conducted following the Delphi- method. The group taking part in the research is assumed to be matured / experienced with the research issues and acts as a ‘panel’. In principle, the panel is capable to provide knowledge *from within* instead of *on* them. The objective is that the researcher and members of the panel dialogue together by means of a facilitated and well-structured correspondence, in at least three discussion rounds. Based on a literature study focused on *misunderstanding in intercultural communication / collaboration*, the researcher elaborates a short questionnaire. The questionnaire will provide a short theoretical background justifying the ‘open’ questions inviting the panel to present their short narratives on experienced misunderstandings.

Characteristic for Delphi is that all the information resulting from the discussion rounds will be analyzed and presented to the panel in the synthesized form. It is expected that in the synthesis, the provided narratives can be ordered into (at least) two categories: 1) related to the often-quoted cultural differences; 2) related to an assumed shared understanding on professional concepts / terminology.

The syntheses and related new questions form the basis for the next discussion round, after which the procedure restarts in order to deepen the discussion among the members of the panel and the researcher emphasizing the distinction between the two categories. It is expected that in the course of the discussion rounds, a systematic overview of the various opinions results in a more or less *shared understanding* among panel members on the causes of current misunderstandings in intercultural professional collaboration / communication. In addition, the discussion facilitates a *mutual learning process* – knowledge transfer between panel members and researcher and panel members.

The members of the panel are invited in repeated turns to adapt and / or complete their earlier expressed opinions, or to present new opinions, taking into account the provided synthesis of prior discussion rounds.

The researcher will respect *anonymity* of the panel members. In that way, a *confrontation of opinions* will be facilitated and a confrontation of panel members avoided.

### 3.2. *The panel*

*Western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries,*  
*and/ or*  
*Western experts involved in training people in (or from) developing countries.*

For the selection of the panel members, friends and relatives -working in organizations relevant to the research project (ICCO, IDA Solutions, IDA Foundation, Stimulans International, and Arcadis)- provided me with an introduction to their colleagues.

### 3.3. *Literature study*

Literature study will be focusing on misunderstanding in intercultural communication / collaboration.

### 3.4. Discussion rounds<sup>59</sup>

#### First discussion round:

The first questionnaire will provide a short theoretical background on *misunderstanding in intercultural communication / collaboration* orienting the responses on the ‘open’ questions in the questionnaire. Besides the general information to situate the panel members (name, gender, profession, experience in intercultural collaboration / communication, eventual participation in an acculturation training, etc.), the members of the panel will be invited to provide short *narratives* of experienced misunderstandings.

The researcher will use a code system for each panel member to assure an anonymous feedback of the information in the second discussion round.

#### Second discussion round:

The information of the first round will be analyzed and a classification will be made in (at least) two categories: 1) related to the often-quoted cultural differences; 2) related to an assumed shared understanding on professional concepts / terminology. In a synthesis report the researcher will justify the choices of categorization referring to relevant theories and formulate additional questions. First, the researcher will ask the panel members to categorize their narratives in the given categorization. Second, the panel members will be invited to respond on questions focusing to deepen the discussion on the misunderstandings in the 2<sup>nd</sup> category (whether and how ‘concepts’ / ‘models’ / ‘theories’ related to the shared professional background are discussed; whether the panel members are of the opinion that these concepts are understood by the counterpart / trainee and can be applied by them, whether the expert was aware (through training or information received from the company) of this phenomena, etc..).

#### Third discussion round:

In the synthesis report, the researcher

- Describes the role of ‘mutual assumption of *shared understanding* regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession’ as expressed by the panel members;
- Compares the two (or more) categories of misunderstandings and their impact on project / tasks implementations or -in training situations- the application of the new knowledge in the situation ‘back home’
- Proposes draft recommendations regarding intercultural training to experts who have to perform professional tasks in collaboration with colleagues in an intercultural setting.

The panel will be invited to comment and / or complete the elements of the synthesis report.

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<sup>59</sup> The discussion rounds as given in this research project changed during the research, this is inevitable when using the Delphi method.

### 3.5. *Final report*

The final report will be sent to the panel.

## 4. **Time schedule**

Still to be discussed with the supervisor. These are the first ideas for the time schedule for the three discussion rounds:

*First discussion round:*

Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> of September:

Send the invitation to take part on the panel and the first questionnaire by e-mail.

Friday 29<sup>th</sup> of September:

Receive answers on first questionnaire + creation of the panel members.

*Second discussion round:*

Friday 20<sup>th</sup> October:

Send synthesis report on first questionnaire and second questionnaire.

Friday 27<sup>h</sup> of October

Receive answers on second questionnaire.

*Third and maybe last discussion round:*

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> of November:

Send synthesis report and eventually a third questionnaire.

Friday 17<sup>th</sup> of November:

Receive comments or answers on third questionnaire

*If necessary the fourth discussion round:*

Friday 1<sup>st</sup> of December:

Send the final synthesis.

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> of December:

Receive eventual comments on synthesis report.

## 5. Relevant literature

To answer the research questions, I will concentrate on the following literature:

- General information about intercultural training – culture specific programs/ culture awareness programs, the combined programs.
- The cultural dimensions of Hofstede
- LAC training (Muller-Jacquier)
- Views on diversity (Evelien van Asperen)
- Study on *misunderstanding* (Jan ten Thije) – three steps: generalizing, perspectivizing; contrasting.
- Study on conflicts (Schneller): when one thinks someone has the same identity/ is not so different, then one interprets what is said and done and believes that this is also the way the other person meant to say or do it. The more you think someone is alike the surer you are about the way you interpret what is said. The more you disbelieve the fact you might have understood it incorrectly. – The 3 steps plan of Jan ten Thije does not go further than generalizing because one believes that the other person sees it the same way so there is no need of perspectivizing and the possibility of contrasting cultures does not occur



**Invitation for expert panel**

September 18- 2006

Dear Sir or Madam,

In preparation of my master thesis in communication studies (with a focus on ‘intercultural communication’) at the University of Utrecht, I kindly ask you to participate in my research project.

My name is Marije Busstra; 29 years ago I was born in the Netherlands but brought up in developing countries (Uganda, Southern Sudan and Burkina Faso) where both of my parents were involved in various international development aid projects. At the age of 19, I returned to the Netherlands for my bachelor study in social sciences (2001), after which I developed further interest in intercultural communication processes orienting me to my master study at the University of Utrecht. The phenomenon of ‘misunderstanding occurring in intercultural communication situations’ became an important topic for me during this study. I started wondering whether these miscommunications only find their causes in cultural differences or whether other –more general- communication aspects might play a role. The research project for which I require your participation will focus on this question.

Working abroad is reserved to a select group of people who have the expertise that is needed in the different countries where they are going to work (and sometimes live). In the frame of this research, I label them as experts.

In the past years, the world seems to become smaller and the number of experts increases. Many research projects have been conducted focussing on the need for intercultural training to prepare experts leaving their home country to work (and live) abroad. In general, the conclusions are that intercultural training is a must. However, the way these trainings should be conducted is still part of a discussion between the different researchers. Intercultural training, among other topics, implies ‘intercultural communication’ with an emphasis on ‘misunderstandings’.

In short: in preparing experts for intercultural encounters, the topic ‘intercultural communication’ cannot be neglected. Experts will have to communicate with people with different cultural backgrounds and most probably, they will have to face misunderstandings.

Interesting questions are: ‘What are the main causes of these misunderstandings (is it more than cultural differences)?’ How can experts be prepared in such a way that these misunderstandings can be avoided?

With this research project -for my master I tend exploring possible responses to these questions in collaboration with a group of experts -having experienced this type of misunderstandings- acting as a panel.

I am addressing you to ask whether you would like to take part in this panel of experts to jointly explore our experiences and (new) knowledge and try to better understand the phenomena of misunderstandings in intercultural communication / collaboration processes.

The objective of this research project is to *facilitate a well-structured opinion forming process among western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries resulting in a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication.*

The research focus is restricted to *experienced misunderstandings occurred in intercultural communication / collaboration situations that occurred in the professional field between the colleagues in (or from) developing countries and / or trainees and the western expert, which influenced (future) project / task implementation.*

After this short introduction, I will provide some information on the research method, on the required background for the panel members and the time schedule indicating the time demanded for your participation in the research. I do hope that my research project raises your interest to participate in this joint search process and it will result in satisfying ideas and recommendations for an improved intercultural communication.

### **Research method**

The research will be conducted following the Delphi- method. The group taking part in the research is assumed to be matured / experienced with the research issues and acts as a 'panel'. In principle, the panel is capable to provide knowledge *from within* instead of *on* them. The idea is that the researcher and members of the panel dialogue together by means of a facilitated and well-structured e-mail correspondence, in at least three discussion rounds.

Characteristic for Delphi is that the information resulting from the discussion rounds will be analyzed and presented to the panel in a synthesized form. The syntheses and related new questions form the basis for the next discussion round, after which the procedure restarts in order to deepen the discussion among the members of the panel and the researcher.

It is expected that in the course of the discussion rounds, a systematic overview of the various opinions results in a more or less *shared understanding* among panel members on the causes of current misunderstandings in intercultural professional collaboration / communication. In addition, the discussion facilitates a *mutual learning process* – knowledge transfer between panel members and between researcher and panel members.

The members of the panel are invited in repeated turns to adapt and / or complete their earlier expressed opinions, or to present new opinions, taking into account the provided synthesis of prior discussion rounds.

The researcher will respect *anonymity* of the panel members. In that way, a *confrontation of opinions* will be facilitated and a confrontation of panel members avoided.

### **The panel members**

As mentioned in the objective, the panel members should be:

- Western experts working with people in (or from) developing countries, and/ or
- Western experts involved in training people in (or from) developing countries.

### **Planned time schedule for the discussion rounds**

Each discussion round provides some theoretical information and a synthesis report of the previous discussion round. This will be followed by several questions. To answer those questions one must reckon on at least 30 to 60 minutes, not taking in account the time consumed by the reflection on questions and possible answers.

*The first discussion round:*

September 18 (today): You received the first questionnaire enclosed with this same e-mail.

Friday September 29: This is the final date to send back your answers on the first questionnaire and become a member of the panel of experts.

*Second discussion round:*

Friday October 20: You will receive the synthesis report of the first questionnaire and a second questionnaire.

Friday October 27 : This is the final date to send back your answers on the second questionnaire.

*Third and eventually last discussion round:*

Friday November 10: You will receive the synthesis report of the second questionnaire and maybe a third questionnaire.

Friday November 17: This is the final date to send back your eventual comments and if necessary the answers on the third questionnaire.

*If necessary the fourth discussion round:*

Friday December 01: You will receive the final synthesis.

Friday December 08: This is the final date to send your eventual comments on this synthesis report.

### **May I welcome you on the panel of experts?**

Hopefully this information has raised your interest to take part on the panel of experts for my research project. Please will you be so kind to send me an e-mail message - as soon as possible- to inform me whether I can add you to the list of panel members or not.

In case you decide to participate, please find enclosed to this e-mail the first questionnaire. I hope receiving your answers before or on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September.

Thank you very much for reading this invitation letter,  
Greetings,

Marije Busstra  
E-mail: m.busstra@students.uu.nl

## Questionnaire First Discussion Round

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**Time estimation:** You won't need more than 5 minutes for the first part of the questionnaire; the time needed for the second part –formulation of 1 or 2 narratives / cases- is difficult to estimate, but in a try out people needed approximately 30 minutes per narrative.

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In this first discussion round the search is restricted to:

*Experienced misunderstandings occurred in intercultural communication / collaboration situations that occurred in the professional field between the colleagues in (or from) developing countries and / or trainees and the western expert, which influenced (future) project / task implementation.*

To be able to elaborate a general idea on the different panel members, I am asking you to provide me with the following information, which will be handled confidentially:

1. Name:	2. Your e-mail address to be used during the research period:
3. Gender: M / F <sup>60</sup>	4. Year of birth:
5. Profession:	
6. Year you started to work as western expert:	
7. List the continents in which you worked or (in case of training situation) the continents of origin of the trainees:	
8. Did you ever participate in an intercultural (or acculturation) training preparing you for your work as expert abroad?  Yes / No <sup>61</sup>	
9. If yes, can you provide me with the name of the institution and the year of training?	
Institution:	Year:

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<sup>60</sup> Delete what doesn't apply for your situation.

<sup>61</sup> Delete what doesn't apply for your situation.

Thanks for answering these first general questions. Next, I would like to continue with the question concerning the content of this research, needing more reflection. But before doing so, I will give some theoretical background information you might need to respond correctly.

### **Theoretical background information**

For this part of the questionnaire, I consider it necessary to provide -in the textbox below- some theoretical information on the term '*misunderstanding*':

Successful communication implies that the speaker's intention when transferring a message is the same as the meaning the listener attributes to this message. This could happen without problems when the speaker and the listener share the same ideas, experiences and frames of references. But if there is even a slightest difference, the listener could attribute another meaning, based on his own ideas, experiences and frames of references, to the message of the speaker. One could say that the greater the differences between the speaker and the listener, the greater the possibility of a failed communication, failed understanding.

'Understanding can take one of three forms: When a message has been sent and is correctly decoded (i.e., the meaning attributed by the receiver is highly similar to the intention of the sender), one may speak of satisfying or "positive" understanding. On the other hand, when transmitted code does not exist in the receiver's experience and pool of knowledge, it is called "non-understanding."

The third possibility is "**misunderstanding**." It is the result of pseudo-understanding: The addressee attributes a certain meaning rooted in his own individual pool of knowledge to the sender's signal or sign. But this meaning attribution differs, or even contradicts, the sender's intention when he/she encodes the message.' (Schneller, S (1989)<sup>62</sup>

In your situation - as a western expert working with colleagues and / or trainees from developing countries - one could say that the differences in cultural background would imply a great possibility of misunderstanding during interaction. Misunderstandings are difficult to detect because the listener attributes his/ her own meaning to the message that has been given. In cases one realizes that a misunderstanding took place, a lot of damage could have been done (or has already been done) to the work you have been doing.

In this discussion round, I would like to focus on *the kind of misunderstandings as defined by Schneller*, occurred during your work with colleagues and / or trainees from developing countries, *influencing project / task implementation*.

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<sup>62</sup> Schneller, S (1989), *Intercultural and intrapersonal processes and factors of misunderstanding: implications for multicultural training*, International Journal/ of Intercultural Relations, Vol. 13. pp. 465-484.

I would like to receive 1 or 2 short narratives/ cases (between 300 and 400 words) of experienced misunderstandings in your professional field while working with a colleague(s) from a developing country. Please use the textboxes prepared on the next page. These narratives will also be used for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> discussion rounds, so it is advisable to save them on your own computer.<sup>63</sup>

**Narratives/ cases** (between 300 and 400 words each), indicating the country in which the misunderstanding occurred<sup>64</sup>:

**1.**

**Country:**

**2.**

**Country:**

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<sup>63</sup> I will use a code system for each panel member to assure an anonymous feedback of the information in following discussion rounds.

<sup>64</sup> I will use a code system to assure an anonymous feedback of the information in following discussion rounds.

## Synthesis report of the first discussion round

Marije Busstra

### *1. Presentation panel members*

For this research, 53 western experts have been invited to participate. They were selected on their working experience in developing countries.

In first instance, 25 experts out of 53 invited reacted positively on the invitation for participation in the research project. From this group, 18 questionnaires were received and treated. Consequently, the panel consists of 18 members, of which 3 female. Six (6) nationalities are represented in the panel: Dutch (10), Australian (2); British (2); American (1); Danish (1) and Spanish (1).

The majority of the panel members (12) is in the age group older than 50, only four panel members did not reach the 40 yet. Accordingly, the general working experience of all panel members is impressive as is their experience as expert in developing countries, covering 7 continents:

- 7 members between 5 to 8 years, 6 in Asia (2 of them equally in Africa) and 1 in Africa;
- 8 members between 19 to 28 years, in Africa (6), Asia (6), South America (2) and the Caribbean (1)
- 3 members more than 30 years, in Africa (2), Asia (2), Islands Pacific (1) and Eastern Europe (1)

The panel covers a variety of professional responsibilities:

- 6 members are project manager and / or have advisory tasks in project management
- 5 members have expertise in nature resources management and conservation / ecology
- 5 members are specialized in training / (adult) education (various professional backgrounds: forestry, social science, Mennonite pastor, medical doctor)
- 1 member specialized in tourism after a long carrier as diplomat
- 1 member is consultant in public sector development

Nine of the panel members followed an intercultural training in preparation on their work in developing countries.

To have so many experienced people in the panel of this research project willing to reflect on intercultural misunderstandings they experienced during their carrier creates opportunities for a high quality dialogue between panel members. I consider it a great honor for me that you all trust me the task as facilitator (as well as participant) in the dialogue and will do my outmost best to meet the expectations.

## 2. *Research objectives and question*

The research methodology permits the facilitation of a well-structured opinion forming process among the panel members all working with people in (or from) developing countries.

Through this process and in close collaboration with the panel, I search:

- to formulate a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings and
- to develop an operational framework enabling actors in intercultural situation to not only analyze intercultural misunderstandings, but to enable them to avoid or to 'go beyond' such misunderstandings.

I question whether in work situations misunderstanding occurs because of the often quoted cultural differences between the communicating parties or because of the mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding concepts and terminology related to their work. Because of sharing professional backgrounds, they might assume a *shared understanding* on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly in implementing their tasks.

Several panel members seem to recognize the phenomena of 'assuming shared understanding with members of a same profession' as the following quotations show:

- *'I work as scientist and much of the work is technical, therefore meanings are generally clear and misunderstandings are not very common.'*
- *'All of the people of the irrigation department where involved in the calculation of the liters into minutes and clearly understood the importance of it, at least that is what I thought.'*
- *'As they had been involved in surveying that plain before (...), I assumed that they would know what to do.'*
- *'The term rational use is one very common in the language (documents) of the WHO (World Health Organization) and of experts in public health' when talking about good practices of medicines management, (...)'*
- *'So at start of the training we spoke enthusiastically about the same topic, though we noticed later on they had a very different image about the topic.'*
- *Co-facilitators seem to be perfectly informed on participatory approaches and often claim to have experience with the approach, (...) in practice either 'facilitation' turns out to become 'teaching' or 'lecturing', either information resulting from participants discussions is neglected or overruled or simply refused since 'it does not fit in the project objectives', etc.'*



### 3) Analytical frameworks used for analyzing narratives

The 18 panel members provided in total 30 narratives dealing with misunderstandings experienced in intercultural collaboration. Fifteen of the misunderstandings described originate from Asia (9 in China, 1 in Nepal, 1 in Indonesia, 1 in Sri Lanka, 1 Iraq); 10 from Africa (3 in West Africa, 5 in Southern Africa and 2 in East Africa); 1 misunderstanding occurred in South America and 2 panel members presented misunderstandings they experienced in training situations in multi cultural settings with participants from different continents.

In order to analyze the received narratives, three different theoretical frameworks (see annex) are used, permitting to determine possible *causes* of intercultural misunderstandings:

- a) *Analytical framework related to cultural / linguistic differences* conceived by Müller-Jacquier<sup>65</sup> (2004) including the value dimensions of Hofstede G<sup>66</sup> (1991) and Hofstede G. J. <sup>67</sup>(2002);
- b) *Analytical framework of views on diversity* introduced by Van Asperen<sup>68</sup> (2005)
- c) *Analytical framework or 3 sequential steps in the verbalizing process* developed by Ten Thije<sup>69</sup> (2003)

#### Sub a)

Müller-Jacquier claims that differentiation of all possible perspectives provides important information to improve understanding on *causes* of misunderstandings. An advantage of this framework is the creation of possibilities to reflect on ones own perspectives *and* on the possible perspectives of other actors in the verbalizing process (communication). A disadvantage however is that the framework emphasizes the differences between the actors instead of leading to how to go beyond misunderstanding' (e.g. through the achievement of 'shared understanding').

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<sup>65</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004) Linguistic Awareness of Cultures [The original German version is published as: Muller- Jacquier, B (2000) Linguistic Awareness of Cultures, Grundlagen eines Trainingsmoduls. In Bolten, J (ed) *Studien zur Internationalen unternehmenskommunikation*. Leipzig: popp, 20-49].

<sup>66</sup> Hofstede G (1991), 'Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen', Amsterdam: Contact

<sup>67</sup> Hofstede, G. J., P. B. Pedersen, et al. (2002). *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures*, Intercultural Press.

<sup>68</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), '*Intercultural Communication & Ideology*', Utrecht: Pharos – Center of expertise on refugees and health in the Netherlands ([www.pharos.nl](http://www.pharos.nl)). This publication came out in Dutch as thesis at The University of Tilburg in 2003.

Asperen van, E (2005), *De interculturele paradox*, Handboek Zorg Thuis van Elsevier/Reed in aug. 2005 inleg nr. 7

<sup>69</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), *Perspectivising intercultural discourse*. To appear in Bührig, K./ Thije, J.D. ten (eds), *Beyond misunderstanding. The linguistic reconstruction of intercultural discourse*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Sub b)

Van Asperen states that the first approach risks leading towards two variants on views on diversity: 'monism' and 'relativism'. Both create the communicative style of 'us versus them'. She introduces an alternative view: 'communicative moral universalism' where communication is focused on 'all of us together', which tends to *avoid or overcome* intercultural misunderstandings.

Sub c)

Possibly, the element Ten Thije (2003) adds to the analytic frameworks might assist avoidance of misunderstandings. He proposes '*the detection of the interactive impact of linguistic contrasts*'. It pursues the question as to how people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds react to unexpected (re)actions in intercultural discourse. He introduces a 3 steps procedure to not only avoid but to go 'beyond' intercultural misunderstandings by emphasizing the importance of *communicative expectations* actors held in an intercultural discourse. The procedure reconstructs *how shared understanding* in intercultural discourse is brought about.

In my opinion, misunderstandings occur in situations where people are no longer bothered by cultural differences because they find themselves in a situation with someone with an *identical identity*. The *mutual assumption of a shared understanding* of professional concepts / terminology may possibly be the pitfall for misunderstanding when one goes abroad for his/ her work. I argue that these (mutual) assumptions risk causing major misunderstandings and that in intercultural discourses shared understanding should be created every time again.

#### 4) *Synthesis first analysis of the narratives*

In order to achieve the first research objective (develop a set of basic assumptions), it is necessary to determine the causes of the occurred misunderstandings. With reference to the analytical frameworks in annex, I would like us to determine possible *cultural/ linguistic differences causing misunderstandings* following Müller-Jacquier. This kind of framework is often used in intercultural training programs to prepare experts for their intercultural experience. The advantage of this framework is that people have to look at a same situation through the different perspectives of the communicating parties. In this way all different reasons for the eventual cause of the misunderstanding are made visible.

This way of analyzing could help to classify yourself and the other actors in your communication process using the analytical framework of van Asperen. She argues that the cultural differences might not be the real cause of the miscommunication, but in fact the '*views on diversity*' of the communicating parties influence the intercultural understanding. While communicating the differences between actors are expressed, by using 'us-them' communication patterns, so a shared understanding cannot be created. Analytical frameworks like Müller-Jacquier emphasize these differences. In your narratives the misunderstanding already took place so only two of the three '*views on diversity*' described by van Asperen can be recognized.

I could roughly make three categorizations in the different narratives where one could recognize one of the 'views on diversity':

- The *way one mentions his/ her idea* (this could be on a project, by e-mail, training situation, contact with colleague(s)). In 21 of the 30 cases this was mentioned. In 16 cases I would say the given idea came from a monistic point of view. In 1 case it could have been as well monistic as relativistic and in 4 cases it seems relativistic.
- The *communication process*. In 28 of the 30 cases the communication was described; 19 cases tend to a monistic point of view, 3 could both be monistic or relativistic, depending on the communication that took place, and in 6 cases I recognized relativism.
- The *final decision*. In 17 of the 30 cases the final decision was described. In 13 cases decisions seem to be monistic and in 4 cases based on relativism.

I do want to state that this classification can only be a rough classification. The narratives are written from one perspective, the interaction between actors was barely visible for me, and I had no access to additional information on the situation in which the misunderstanding occurred. It is important to realize that classifications made by means of these frameworks do not describe the personality of the different actors, but is restricted to their situation based behavior!

In his research, ten Thije focused on intercultural interaction situations where no communication problems occurred. In analyzing interaction not resulting in misunderstandings, he discovered three sequential steps used by the communicating actors: generalizing, perspectivising, contrasting cultures. He argues that in case these steps aren't followed in intercultural communication situations, misunderstandings are bound to occur.

On my demand, you provided narratives in which a misunderstanding already took place. Following the theory of ten Thije, we can assume that the communication processes described by you did not achieve the third step of 'contrasting cultures'. Although I have no view on the perspective of all actors in the process (narratives are limited to your perspective), I made an effort to analyze them using ten Thije's analytical framework.

#### Generalizing

- In 21 of the cases analyzed, the experts stayed in step 1, they communicated from their own perspective – generalizing their own perspective. Especially sentences as: '*I thought they understood...*'; '*I assumed that they would know...*' show that no attempts to perspectivise were assumed necessary.
- Four members of our panel, provided extra information in the first round showing that they managed to perspectivise and even contrast cultures after the misunderstanding took place. By doing so they finally understood the cause of the misunderstanding.

### Perspectivising

- In 5 of the narratives the expert listened to the perspective of the other, but did not make the attempt to give his/ her own perspective necessary to contrast cultures.
- In 4 narratives the expert tried explaining his/ her perspective, but without result from the other communicating actor.
- In 1 of these 4 narratives the other communicating actor even mentions understanding the perspective of the expert, but later it seems that this isn't true.
- However, three members of our panel admitted that they finally understood the causes of the misunderstanding described.

In contrast to the analytic framework for cultural / linguistic differences (Müller-Jacquier) as *causes* of misunderstandings, the frameworks of van Asperen as well as the framework of ten Thije permit analyzing the *interaction between actors*.

In case communicating actors follow the 3 steps outlined by ten Thije's and achieve *contrasting cultures*, they also achieve *communicative moral universalism view* as described by van Asperen. Both aim to achieve *shared understanding* between actors in the communication process.

### 5) *Second round research project*

The second round of the research process is the most crucial one demanding a lot of the panel members in terms of efforts and time! Since the results of the first round are very rich and promising (also according to my tutor in the University), I really do hope that all panel members will find time and energy to continue. The panel members who made the first try out with the questionnaire needed 45 minutes to read the information and 1 hour to analyze each narrative (two hours for 2 narratives). Meantime, I can promise that the third round will be limited to providing information on the results of the second round and one or two questions regarding your appreciations of the analyzing frameworks.

The aim of the second round is to investigate the causes of misunderstanding to be able to formulate a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings in the third discussion round. By means of a well structured questionnaire, you are invited to analyze your narratives following the frameworks introduced under 3) and in annex to this document. In my opinion, these frameworks remain rather theoretical, but with your assistance we hopefully can develop a more *operational framework* which can be used in future by you and other experts to not only analyze misunderstandings, but to avoid or to 'go beyond' them.

The questionnaire guides you in a second reflection on your narratives, using the 3 analytical frameworks. The synthesis of all narratives, as well as the narrative jointly analyzed with the panel member concerned, might orient you in the analysis of your cases.

1. Reflect on your narrative(s) using the analytical frameworks for the determination of possible causes of misunderstandings. In order to achieve the first research objective (develop a set of basic assumptions), I am especially interested in your arguments concerning the causes you recognized.
2. Once more you are invited to reflect on the narrative(s) by using the 3 steps procedure aiming to go beyond misunderstandings through the achievement of shared understanding on terms, concepts, terminology, etc. In reflecting on your narrative(s), you may detect in which step of the verbalizing process the misunderstanding occurred, what the result was and how one should have acted to avoid it.

You will find the annex (theoretical background information), the second questionnaire and an example questionnaire also attached to the e-mail.

According to the program send to you earlier, I hope to receive your filled questionnaire before **October 28<sup>th</sup>**. In case you cannot meet this deadline please inform me on forehand.

## Questionnaire 2<sup>nd</sup> round

Please, make use of the 3 frameworks in annex to analyze your narrative(s)!

1. In order to achieve the first research objective (develop a set of basic assumptions), it will be interesting to receive your arguments concerning the causes of misunderstandings you recognized in your narrative(s). Therefore, I invite you to reflect on the misunderstandings you narrated in the first round. With reference to the analytical frameworks in annex, you can determine possible *cultural/ linguistic differences causing* misunderstandings following Müller-Jacquier<sup>70</sup> and make the link with two of the three ‘*views on diversity*’ described by van Asperen<sup>71</sup> (for the third view see question 2). Please write your analysis in the table below.

**NB: In analyzing the misunderstandings you should try to formulate (several) perspectives for all possible causes!**

### Case 1:

Possible causes of misunderstanding (Muller Jaquier)	Differentiated perspectives (Müller-Jacquier)  In your case different misunderstanding can be determined, number them in order of appearance.	Monistic view (van Asperen)	Relativistic view (van Asperen)	Eventual observations:
<b>a) Social meaning of words /terminology</b>				

<sup>70</sup> Muller- Jacquier, B (2004) Linguistic Awareness of Cultures [The original German version is published as: Muller- Jacquier, B (2000) Linguistic Awareness of Cultures, Grundlagen eines Trainingsmoduls. In Bolten, J (ed) *Studien zur Internationalen unternehmenskommunikation*. Leipzig: popp, 20-49].

Hofstede G (1991), *‘Allemaal andersdenkenden; omgaan met cultuurverschillen’*, Amsterdam: Contact

Hofstede, G. J., P. B. Pedersen, et al. (2002). *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures*, Intercultural Press.

<sup>71</sup> Asperen van, E (2005), *‘Intercultural Communication & Ideology’*, Utrecht: Pharos – Center of expertise on refugees and health in the Netherlands ([www.pharos.nl](http://www.pharos.nl)). This publication came out in Dutch as thesis at The University of Tilburg in 2003.

Asperen van, E (2005), *De interculturele paradox*, Handboek Zorg Thuis van Elsevier/Reed in aug. 2005 inleg nr. 7

Possible causes of misunderstanding (Muller Jaquier)	Differentiated perspectives (Müller-Jacquier) In your case different misunderstanding can be determined, number them in order of appearance.	Monistic view (van Asperen)	Relativistic view (van Asperen)	Eventual observations:
<b>b) Speech Acts</b>				
<b>c) Choice of topic</b>				
<b>d) Directness <i>versus</i> indirectness</b>				
<b>e) Functional varieties of speech</b>				
<b>f) Cultural specific values / attitudes</b>	<b>High power – Low power</b>			
	<b>Collectivistic - Individualistic</b>			
	<b>Masculine – Feminine</b>			
	<b>Uncertainty avoidance – Uncertainty tolerance</b>			
<b>g) Others?</b>				

**Case 2:**

Possible causes misunderstanding (Muller Jaquier)	Differentiated perspectives (Muller Jaquier) *	Monistic view** (van Asperen)	Relativistic view** (van Asperen)	Eventual observations:
<b>a) Social meaning of words /terminology</b>				
<b>b) Speech Acts</b>				
<b>c) Choice of topic</b>				
<b>d) Directness <i>versus</i> indirectness</b>				
<b>e) Functional varieties of speech</b>				
<b>f) Cultural specific values / attitudes</b>	<b>High power – Low power</b>			
	<b>Collectivistic - Individualistic</b>			
	<b>Masculine – Feminine</b>			
	<b>Uncertainty avoidance – Uncertainty tolerance</b>			



Possible causes misunderstanding (Muller Jaquier)	Differentiated perspectives (Muller Jaquier) *	Monistic view** (van Asperen)	Relativistic view** (van Asperen)	Eventual observations:
<b>g) Others?</b>				

2. Compared to the analytic framework for cultural / linguistic differences (Müller-Jacquier) as *causes* of misunderstandings, the frameworks of van Asperen and ten Thije<sup>72</sup> (2003) better permit analyzing the *interaction between actors*. In case communicating actors follow the 3 steps outlined by ten Thije's and achieve *contrasting cultures*, they also achieve *communicative moral universalism view* as described by van Asperen. Both aim to achieve *shared understanding* between actors in the communication process.

Once more you are invited to reflect on your narratives, this time by using the 3 steps procedure of ten Thije aiming to go beyond misunderstandings. In reflecting on your narrative(s) in the table below, you may recognize:

- a) in which step of the verbalizing process the misunderstanding occurred and
- b) what you could have done to avoid the misunderstanding
- c) whether in achieving *contrasting cultures*, also the *communicative moral universalism view* is achieved.

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<sup>72</sup> Thije, J.D. ten (2004), *Perspectivising intercultural discourse*. To appear in Bührig, K./ Thije, J.D. ten (eds), *Beyond misunderstanding. The linguistic reconstruction of intercultural discourse*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

**Case 1:**

a) Step(s) in which the misunderstanding(s) occurred	b) Suggestions to avoid misunderstandings
c) In case 'contrasting cultures' would be achieved, is 'communicative moral universalism view' achieved? Please justify.	

**Case 2:**

a) Step(s) in which the misunderstanding(s) occurred	b) Suggestions to avoid misunderstandings
c) In case 'contrasting cultures' would be achieved, is 'communicative moral universalism view' achieved? Please justify.	

3. Please, can you give your appreciation on these analytic frameworks?

## Synthesis report of the second discussion round

Marije Busstra

### I. Participation panel members<sup>73</sup>

In the first round, 18 panel members presented 30 narratives. In this second round 12 of those panel members participated. Though, a 13<sup>th</sup> panel member joined in, responding on the questionnaire of the first as well as the second round. His participation results in 13 out of 19 panel members, analyzing 21 cases.

- Six (6) of the analyzed cases took place in Africa
- Ten (10) in Asia
- One (1) in South America
- In four (4) cases no specific country/ continent is applicable due to the fact that the case describes an intercultural training situation, or a misunderstanding often happening in different circumstances.

The observations received from the panel on the analytical frameworks to be used prove that it has been a difficult exercise. Many of you struggled with the terminology because was not in line with your own professional background:

- *'(...)I am not too sure that I quite understand it - as I am a simple ecologist, not a social scientist'*
- *'I hope I haven't misunderstood too much in here. I'm from a different academic culture myself'*
- *'I must admit I have had great difficulties in doing this. I am not an academical type, but more the practical (...)'*
- *'I am just a simple advisor and not a scientist. It looks like I have to go back to university in order to understand the different theories of intercultural communication.'*
- *'I cannot appreciate a process or analytical tool behind a façade of difficult intellectual language. I am too simple for that.'*

Though, I also received positive observations on the frameworks:

- *The analysing framework is of interest for misunderstandings in the communication for people who have to communicate with each other. Therefore, the frameworks proposed are not only of interest for 'intercultural communication'.*
- *I found the analytic frameworks interesting and the diagrams extremely helpful.*
- *(...) the experience has been a positive one for me; I have learned from this analytical exercise for the future. Such exercise helps keep in mind that common understanding is not that common, the same which applies for common sense itself...'*

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<sup>73</sup> A 14<sup>th</sup> panel member send the answers on his/ her second questionnaire when the synthesis report was already send to the panel members. In the final report these answers have been integrated.

In general, the information you provided by analysing your case(s) proves to be very accurate and useful for the research project. The analysis of your responses resulted in an interesting set of assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings. In addition, based on your observations useful recommendations for a more operational analytic framework could be formulated. These results are subject of the present report and the questionnaire joint through which I search for validation of the formulated assumptions and recommendations.

Thanks to your analytic work and the abundant remarks made on the frameworks, an important step has been made towards the achievement of the research objectives. In my master thesis, I will further elaborate on the results of our shared opinion forming process.

## **II. Research objectives/ questions**

### ***2.1 Research objectives***

In my research proposal the following objectives were presented to my faculty (University of Utrecht) and approved by my tutors:

- Formulate a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings;
- Develop an operational framework enabling actors in intercultural situation to not only analyze intercultural misunderstandings, but to enable them to avoid or to 'go beyond' such misunderstandings.

The *research focus* is restricted to experienced misunderstandings occurred in intercultural communication / collaboration situations in the professional field between the colleagues in (or from) developing countries and / or trainees and the western expert<sup>74</sup>, which influenced (future) project / task implementation.

### ***2.2 Research questions***

I question whether in professional situations misunderstanding occurs because of the often quoted cultural differences between the communicating parties or because of the mutual assumption members of a same profession held regarding concepts and terminology related to their profession. Because of sharing professional backgrounds, they might assume a *shared understanding* on related concepts and terminology and act accordingly in implementing their tasks.

- Besides the often-quoted cultural differences as cause of misunderstandings in professional intercultural communication /collaboration situations, what is the role of the *mutual assumption of shared understanding* regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share?
- Since both parties are not trained on misunderstandings caused by a *mutual assumption of shared understanding* of professional concepts / terminology, they are likely not to be recognized in an early stage of the collaboration process. Might it be that this type of misunderstandings effect project / tasks implementations even more negatively than the often-quoted cultural differences?

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<sup>74</sup> In the invitation for the research I stated: '*working abroad is reserved to a select group of people who have the expertise that is needed in the different countries where they are going to work (and sometimes live). In the frame of this research, I label them as experts.*'

### III. Assumptions for an improved communication in intercultural settings

In this chapter, I present the assumptions and recommendations formulated based on my analysis of your work with the analytic frameworks. Detailed analysis reports of the results have been made in preparation of this report (in case you are interested, I can send them to you). From these reports, I provide below only a synthesis plus a selection of quotes to justify my choice for the set of assumptions / recommendations.

To facilitate your work on the questionnaire joint, the numbering of the assumptions / recommendations (in text boxes) corresponds with the numbering in the questionnaire.

#### *Shared understanding*

1. The *mutual assumption of shared understanding* regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share seems to be a very important cause of misunderstanding in the communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.

After analysis of misunderstandings caused by different representations of social meaning of words / terminology or professional terminology, 85% the panel members subscribe to this idea. Several panel members explicitly mentioned that this part of the analysis made them '*realize the importance of words / terms and the danger of taking action on the basis of a one-way interpretation of those words*'. From the responses it became clear that most misunderstandings are related to the use of 'professional concepts / terminology':

- '*The meaning on the term 'entrepreneurial management system' is different for staff on various levels in a public organization*';
- '*My definition of 'forest' seemed to differ from those of the students*';
- '*Their perception of the concept 'soil survey' was clearly different from mine*';
- '*The social meaning of the term 'Rational use of medicines' was different to the participating actors*';
- '*The word sustainable is often misunderstood*'

2. The *status* given to experts by other actors involved is not always similar to the status the expert believes to have. This seems to be a cause of misunderstanding in the communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.

In intercultural situations, experts should pay attention to '*choice of functional varieties of speech*' in their relationship with leaders and persons of the other gender; difference in perceptions of status attributed to leaders and foreigners but also to gender problems proves to play a role in the communication. 62% of the panel members documented '*functional varieties of speech*' as plausible cause for the misunderstanding, mostly related to different perceptions of status attributed to leaders and foreigners but also to gender problems.

- '*As international expert, communication partners often accord me a high status (...) they expect the expert 'to teach them new knowledge / new approaches*'.

In intercultural situations, the status given to experts by the other actors plays a role in the interpretation of *speech acts*. Experts have to pay attention to make a distinction between a behavior intention and its realization through verbal and non-verbal expressions. Misunderstandings eventually caused by speech acts were documented by 69% of the panel members:

- *Questions could have been interpreted as statements (a must).*
- *The Chinese Director translated my 'opinions' in 'instructions'*
- *'Perhaps the staff considered my demands to be a request.'*
- *'Maybe they interpreted the information as an accusation in stead of an explanation.'*

Experts tend to attribute a lower power to their own position in the organization than is attributed to them by the counterparts. In intercultural situations, experts should pay attention to the *'degree in which people expect and / or accept power differences in institutions / organizations'*. Hofstede's dimension *'high power versus low power'* is recognized as possible cause of the misunderstanding by 75% of the panel members. In (5) cases experts seem to believe having a lower power than is attributed to them by colleagues:

- *It is possible misunderstandings took place because the women organizations attributed more power to the social team than the social team presumed.'*
- *Maybe there was a perception amongst the staff that I was high power because I was foreign expert. However, I considered myself an intermediary for the director.'*

However, the attribution of power to the expert might also be related to the power attributed to the donor / client organization:

- *Ultimately the project was closed down by FAO due to misuse of vehicles by national staff and otherwise. This decision was taken without any consultation with the direct beneficiaries.*
- *Without taking in account the possibility of a smaller size project, the management team canceled the project because it didn't fit their expectations to make the project smaller.*

### ***Often quoted cultural differences***

- |   |
|---|
| <p>3. <i>'Directness versus indirectness'</i> seems to be a very likely cause of misunderstanding due to the fact that expectations on directness/ indirectness differ in various situations.</p> |
|---|

92% of the panel members acknowledged *'directness versus indirectness'* (LAC framework) as cause of misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

After analysing the responses, it became clear that *'directness of the expert (team) versus indirectness of the other actors involved'* is evidently a cause of many misunderstandings. But the misunderstandings described in 3 cases also showed that *'indirectness of information provided by the expert (team)'* was not expected by the other actors; due to his/ her status the other actor(s) clearly expected *'directness in information'*.

- |  |
|--|
| <p>4. Experts with dominant <i>'individualistic characteristics'</i> working in cultures with dominant <i>'collectivistic characteristics'</i> should pay attention to the impact of this cultural difference in communication and in collaborative relationships.</p> |
|--|

This dimension of Hofstede is recognized by 58% of the panel members to be an eventual cause for misunderstanding. In most cases the individualistic culture of the expert did not match the collectivistic culture of the other actors involved:

- *'Although communities understand the opportunities that tourism can bring they also have their collective (cultural) values they want to maintain.'*

In other cases the importance of relationships (in group –out group) and loyalty play a role:

- *'Sometimes, the co-facilitator considers the demanding organization as 'in-group' and me as distant expert.'*

- *Chinese academics (including Z) tend to attach greater significance to crediting their teachers (out of a kind of filial loyalty) than those who have contributed intellectually to the work.*

### **Non-cultural causes**

5. Experts should also keep in mind that misunderstandings can be created ‘on purpose’ to improve personal negotiating positions.

23% of the panel members point out that misunderstandings can be created ‘on purpose’ to improve personal negotiating positions:

- *‘Misunderstanding in communication is not only related to cultural differences (...).*
- *Misunderstandings occur, when there are different interests and sometime people have interest in creating these misunderstandings to improve their negotiating position.’*

### **Views on diversity**

Van Asperen states that analytical frameworks like the LAC Framework and Hofstede’s dimensions (integrated in the LAC framework) emphasise the cultural differences between actors, thus forming a base for misunderstanding. By accepting the fact that these existing cultural differences form the problem in intercultural communication, creating *shared understanding* would be impossible. People then tend to communicate/ act from a monistic view (‘only one single view of the world can be correct: It’s either yours or mine, but actually it’s mine) or from a relativistic view (‘the world consists of cultures of equal value. Cultural views of the world can only be understood from inside that culture.’).

85% of the panel members analyzed misunderstandings in their cases all taking place in intercultural situations, by means of the analytic framework ‘views on diversity (van Asperen). Consequently, the LAC framework made it possible to analyse those misunderstandings on eventual cultural differences as possible causes. The idea was that this approach would act as an eye-opener to analyse your own view on diversity and the view of the other actors involved during the situation of the described misunderstanding. As stated by one of the panel members:

- (...) *this framework prepared me for the classification of the misunderstanding in the framework of van Asperen.*

In the synthesis report of the first round, I presented a first analysis of the 30 narratives received using three categories or ‘*stages in the collaboration process*’. After receiving your analysis of the cases, I concluded that the three categories could be maintained although with a slight change in titles compared to those I presented in the first report:

- *Idea presentation stage;*
- *Implementation stage;*
- *Decision- making stage.*

The 85% of the panel members analyzed misunderstandings by means of van Asperen's framework occur in the implementation stage, but 45% of them described views in the '*idea presentation stage*' and 60% of them analyzed views in the '*decision-making stage*' as well. Interesting is that change in views on diversity could be in relation to the different stages of collaboration (see assumption 6).

6. In an early stage in the collaboration process – '*idea presentation stage*' and (early) in the '*implementation stage*', the *monistic view of the experts* and / or the *attribution of a monistic view to the experts by their colleagues* might be the cause of misunderstandings.

The *monistic view of the experts* might be the cause of misunderstandings with counterparts occurring in an early stage in the collaboration process – '*idea presentation stage*' and (early) in the '*implementation stage*'.

73% of the panel members declared to act from a monistic view (in all three stages):

- '*This is our definition and they have to act on it*';
- '*This report was central to all funding and the information needed to be supplied – pronto!*'

One of these panel members claims to communicate from both a monistic and relativistic view, depending on the situation.

27% recognized their monistic view in the stage of '*idea presentation*':

- '(...) when introducing this term. (...) we were more monistic towards the intermediate staff!'

In addition, the *attribution of a monistic view to the experts by their counterparts* might be the cause of misunderstandings with counterparts ('self fulfilling prophecy'). 45% of the panel members sense that their colleagues assume their action to be monistic, even in cases they themselves analyze their actions as relativistic. The attribution of a monistic view by their colleagues in the *idea presentation stage* (27%) is more or less conform the opinion of the panel members.

- '*They expected me to be as strict as their parents*';
- '*They think their way is better than ours.*'

7. In the *implementation stage*, it seem easier for experts to accept the culture differences between them and their colleagues more than in the other stages of the collaboration process: actions from *relativistic view* are observed and experiments with *communicative moral universalism* are possible.

27% of the panel members claim to communicate from a relativistic point of view:

- '*I tried to respect their opinion and train them in democratic decisions*'
- '*The trainers and most of the participants had an open attitude to other culture*'

One of these panel members communicates from both a monistic as a relativistic view, depending on the situation.

36% of the panel members analyzing their view on diversity in various stages of collaboration documented to have acted from a relativistic view in the '*implementation stage*'. Two of those panel members realize that they switch from a monistic to realistic view and visa versa.



Only 18% of the panel members tried to act relativistic in the *presentation of ideas*.  
No relativistic views are analyzed in the *decision-making process*.

27% of the panel members describe communication acts from a '*communicative moral universalism*' view -communication perceived as a learning process for all actors involved-, which tends to avoid or overcome intercultural misunderstandings - -:

- '*Local communities have their own thoughts on tourism development. Through stakeholder workshops, we try to become aware of their needs and visions and try to integrate that within the final development strategy. It's something of both worlds.*'
- '*Through inquiring what the word implied in both cultures and social settings the misunderstanding was resolved. Eventually both the trainers and participants shared a belief in moral universalism that crosses religious ethnic national boundaries.*

8. The *monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization* might be cause of misunderstandings in the '*decision-making stage*'.

18% of the panel members claim that a *monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization* in the '*decision-making*' is the cause of misunderstandings

- '*In case the demanding organization/ donor does not accept my proposal I do not accept the contract*'; '*I think that most (inter) national experts (including demanding organizations) act from a monistic view.*'
- '*(The organization) also had a monistic view: operating at a distance and decisions taken based on reports.*'
- '*(...) the management team cancelled the project because it didn't fit their expectations to make the project smaller*'.

#### IV. Recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural settings

9. Even though the '*idea presentation stage*' is characterized by a *monistic point of view*, during the '*implementation stage*', experts should enable learning processes for all actors involved tending to avoid or overcome intercultural misunderstandings (e.g. by means of facilitated stakeholders participation).

See under assumption 6)

10. Experts often (are obliged to) introduce working concepts of their own cultural group in an intercultural situation resulting in misunderstandings from a *monistic point of view*. Those misunderstandings occur in step 1 of the verbalizing process: *generalizing*.

Experts should find means to reach step 2 (*perspectivizing*) or step 3 (*contrasting cultures*) in order to reach a *shared understanding* on the working concepts by involving all actors (stakeholders) in the process of anticipating possible differences with the standard solutions of other cultural groups and to contrast cultures (a *communicative moral universalism point of view*).

**Note:**

Panel members' recommendations to avoid misunderstanding varied from step 1 to step 3 of the verbalizing process (ten Thije). However, I consider the combination of ten Thije's verbalizing process and the framework of van Asperen (views of diversity) important and took the liberty to classify the recommendations with the help of the two frameworks

**Step 1: Generalizing**

The actors verbalize their own expectations as realizations of standard solutions of their own cultural group

All panel members (100%) identified the cause of misunderstandings in step 1 of the verbalizing process:

- *Eventual comments on (or simple acceptance of) the proposal are a first act of generalizing by all actors.*
- *'The misunderstanding started in the step 1 (generalizing) based on 'Dutch directness' versus 'Chinese indirectness' during the first year of the project.*
- *'Most probably the misunderstanding occurred during the instructions/teaching period.'*
- *This may relate to the point about professional colleagues making too many assumptions of similarity.'*
- *The generalization on both sides became apparent in the discussions when it became obvious that their reaction to what was being said or proposed was quite different that we had expected*
- *The misunderstanding (...) was the result of the generalization from the trainer that an exercise could be universally applied to other cultures.*
- *We used the term 'rational drug use' as mentioned in documents and as used by other experts in a generalized way.*

50% of the panel members formulated recommendations that could be classified under step 1 of the verbalizing process. In five (5) cases, panel members formulated recommendations to avoid misunderstandings from a monistic point of view:

- *Ensuring that the Director saw or heard my request to the staff'*
- *Send a stronger message and outline specifically the type of information required*
- *'The misunderstanding could have been avoided if I had accompanied the team right in the beginning of the field work phase to make sure that my instructions had been understood.'*
- *'The implementation in the Moslem community could have been successful, if the leadership was informed first and when we( as non-Moslem ?) could have convinced them of the religious value of high standards of hygiene.'*
- *'Implementation target should have been discussed in more detail.'*

In three (3) cases, panel members formulated recommendations to avoid misunderstandings from a relativistic point of view:

- *'Adjust your expectations'*
- *'Be aware of the fact that your moral values are cultural specific'*
- *I should have been careful to inform on all steps, so they could see I worked according to their policy*

**Step 2: Perspectivizing**

*Actors anticipate possible differences with the standard problems and solutions of other cultural groups; they relate their knowledge to those of others by taking their cultural standards into account. 'Perspectivizing' works as a result of the speaker monitoring the hearer's reactions in discourse. In case the speaker spots (re)actions from the hearer proving that his knowledge on the social reality is not being understood, he / she can adapt his speech.'*

17% of the panel members documented reaching the step of ‘perspectivising’, but in a later stage returned to generalizing (their standard solutions):

- *‘The misunderstanding occurred when introducing an ‘entrepreneurial management system’ using only the ‘perspectives’ of the European consultants and the burkinabé management team (step 1, partly 2).*
- *‘Because the social team failed to ‘contrast cultures’ when the women organizations were perspectivising (Step 2) their perspectives were generalized, going back to step 1.*

25% of the panel members formulated recommendations that I would classify in step 2 of the verbalizing process. In one case, the panel member formulated recommendations to avoid misunderstandings from a monistic point of view:

- *‘Define forest clearly.’*
- *‘Explain this need more clearly and project the results’*

In the other two cases, panel members formulated recommendations to avoid misunderstandings from a relativistic point of view:

- *‘By first trying to find what the usually practices in the culture of the participants and then decide if the exercises would be applicable in the existing form or in an altered from one would reduce the possibility of being take by surprise’.*
- *‘I should have given more clear instructions and helped the students to decide whether they could manage both football match and the other visit, e.g. by putting up questions to answer to guide them (..) and together with them concluded whether it was possible or not to play football. Then they had been part of the process and learnt from it.’*

### **Step 3: Contrasting cultures**

*The speaker enables the hearer to compare the speaker’s cultural standards with his own and attain an adequate interpretation of the discourse. Finally they will attain intercultural understanding.*

None of the panel members analyzed misunderstanding while contrasting cultures; but the recommendation listed below have been formulated by 50% of the panel members from a communicative moral universalism point of view:

- *‘we should have listened to the women organizations’ perspective first during the inquiry and -in dialogue- ‘test’ the perspective of the management team!! → perspectivising. After having clear what the women organizations had in mind, the perspective of the management team could have been changed (as well as the perspective of the women organizations) based on shared understanding of the situation → contrasting cultures.*
- *‘Stakeholder discussion on the practical meaning of new systems to be introduced. This is what you called (perhaps) a ‘shared understanding’, taking into account different interests.’*
- *‘Developing a common understanding of the situation ‘after the project’ is an important step, identifying the institutional arrangements to assure the sustainability of the project results.’*
- *By first asking what words are used in the participants culture for variations of actions or state of being, in this case for peace, absence of conflict, surrender or by asking was the word “mir” for them conotates. Avoid the assumption that the translated word for peace had the same associations as in the trainers’ culture.*
- *We should have tried to define the term ‘rational drug use’ together, taking in account their cultural backgrounds (...) In this way one could say that trainer and trainees are ‘contrasting cultures’ by defining the term used during the training together. There is a mutual understanding on which base the training can then proceed.’*
- *(Organize) ‘Stakeholder workshops and informal meetings’*

## V. *Recommendations for the use of the analytical frameworks*

The recommendations for the use of the analytical frameworks 11 – 12 are justified in chapter IV, since resulting from your recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural settings.

11. The LAC framework is too detailed: ‘*social meaning of words*’ (a) is analyzed apart from ‘*speech acts*’ (b), ‘*choice of topic*’ (c), ‘*functional varieties of speech*’ (e), and ‘*high power versus low power*’ (f). To make it more functional, the five topics could be combined under the heading ‘*social meaning of words and situations*’.

12. The LAC framework is too much focussed on verbal communication, more attention should be paid to analysis of *non-verbal communication/ behaviour*.

The frameworks: ‘*Views on diversity*’ and ‘*Three sequential steps*’

13. Creating shared understanding among all actors involved seems important for a good (intercultural) communication; once the importance of ‘*perspectivising*’ becomes clear for all actors, those frameworks are very useful to work towards *shared understanding* in intercultural communication based on ‘*contrasting cultures*’ or ‘*communicative moral universalism*’.

### *In general*

14. To understand the terminology of all three frameworks one should have more knowledge of the underpinning theories. A training/ workshop (preferable in the intercultural setting, with the colleagues) to guide through the theory and to dialogue on own and others’ perspectives with people from different cultures would give better results.

#### Difficulty of the terminology

- *For people who don’t know anything about this literature, it might be easier to explore these dimensions of explanation if faced with more explicit questions.*
- *I would prefer a more practical methodology (simple language would already mean an immediate improvement), which can be used while identifying and formulating the project/programme (what can be the pitfalls?) and for analysing the situations in which communication went wrong.*
- *The analytical frameworks share together the weakness to be not straightforward; this makes it difficult to interpret the accuracy of the results, the reliability of the conclusions and consequently their potential for generalization to the general context (outside the planned (optimal) conditions of the research environment).*
- *I cannot appreciate a process or analytical tool behind a façade of difficult intellectual language.*

#### Frameworks should be used within the intercultural setting

- *(...) perhaps to really do this we’d need to hear interpretation from both/all parties involved.*

- *What we want to achieve is a shared understanding between all actors in the communication process. This means that all sides have to prepare themselves and should be open to intercultural differences and exchanges. Shared understanding in combination with an analytical – but practical – framework would be useful.*

#### Workshop/ training

- *It may be that to really apply the techniques here would require a 1+ day workshop in which the terms are vividly explained, and our own (inherently confused!) perspective on the cases is combined with fresh ones.'*

## **VI Acknowledgements**

Last but not least, I would really like to thank you all for participating in this research project. Jointly, we managed analysing misunderstandings happening in practical situations, making it possible to formulate these assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural settings. This could not have been realized without all the work you have done.

In January 2007, I hope to present my master thesis to my tutors in the University of Utrecht. The results of this research will be more elaborated and the set of assumptions and recommendations sustained. In case you are interested to receive the final version of my thesis, please let me know.

## Questionnaire third round:

### I. Assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication

The first research objective is:

*Formulate a coherent set of basic assumptions and recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings.*

Based on an analysis of your responses on the second questionnaire (see synthesis report), I propose a set of assumptions on causes of misunderstanding recommendations for an improved communication in intercultural collaboration settings. Will you please tick whether you (partly) agree with the assumptions and recommendations and, if needed, justify your choice?

#### Assumed causes of misunderstanding

##### *Shared understanding*

1. The *mutual assumption of shared understanding* regarding concepts and terminology related to the profession both parties share seems to be a very important cause of misunderstanding in the communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

2. The *status* given to experts by other actors involved is not always similar to the status the expert believes to have. This seems to be a cause of misunderstanding in the communication with colleagues in intercultural situations.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

##### *Often quoted cultural differences*

3. '*Directness versus indirectness*' seems to be a very likely cause of misunderstanding due to the fact that expectations on directness/ indirectness differ in various situations.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

4. Experts with dominant '*individualistic characteristics*' working in cultures with dominant '*collectivistic characteristics*' should pay attention to the impact of this cultural difference in communication and in collaborative relationships.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

5. Experts should also keep in mind that misunderstandings can be created 'on purpose' to improve personal negotiating positions.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

*Views on diversity*

6. In an early stage in the collaboration process – '*idea presentation stage*' and (early) in the '*implementation stage*', the '*monistic view of the experts*' and / or the '*attribution of a monistic view to the experts by their colleagues*' might be the cause of misunderstandings.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

7. In the '*implementation stage*', it seem easier for experts to accept the culture differences between them and the colleagues more than in the other stages of the collaboration process: actions from '*relativistic view*' are observed and experiments with '*communicative moral universalism*' are possible.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

8. The *monistic view of the management team / (donor) organization* might be cause of misunderstandings in the *'decision-making stage'*.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

Recommendations for an improved communication

9. Even though the *'idea presentation stage'* is characterized by a monistic point of view, during the *'implementation stage'*, experts should enable learning processes for all actors involved tending to avoid or overcome intercultural misunderstandings (e.g. by means of facilitated stakeholders participation).

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

10. Experts often (are obliged to) introduce working concepts of their own cultural group in an intercultural situation resulting in misunderstandings from a monistic point of view. Those misunderstandings occur in step 1 of the verbalizing process: *generalizing*. Experts should find means to reach step 2 (*perspectivizing*) or step 3 (*contrasting cultures*) in order to reach a shared understanding on the working concepts by involving all actors (stakeholders) in the process of anticipating possible differences with the standard solutions of other cultural groups and to contrast cultures (*a communicative moral universalism point of view*).

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		



## II. Recommendations for the use of the analytical framework:

The second research objective is:

*Develop an operational framework enabling actors in intercultural situation to not only analyze intercultural misunderstandings, but to enable them to avoid or to 'go beyond' such misunderstandings*

Based on an analysis of your responses on the second questionnaire (see synthesis report), I propose recommendations listed below in order to improve the framework used in the second round of the research process. Will you please tick whether you (partly) agree with the assumptions and, if needed, justify your choice?

*LAC framework*

10. The LAC framework is too detailed: '*social meaning of words*' (a) is analyzed apart from '*speech acts*' (b), '*choice of topic*' (c), '*functional varieties of speech*' (e), and '*high power versus low power*' (f). To make it more functional, the five topics could be combined under the heading '*social meaning of words and situations*'.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

11. The LAC framework is too much focussed on verbal communication, more attention should be paid to analysis of *non-verbal communication/ behaviour*.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

*'Views on diversity'* and *'Three sequential steps'*

12. Creating shared understanding among all actors involved seems important for a good (intercultural) communication; once the importance of '*perspectivising*' becomes clear for all actors, those frameworks are very useful to work towards *shared understanding* in intercultural communication based on '*contrasting cultures*' or '*communicative moral universalism*'.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

*In general*

14. To understand the terminology of all three frameworks one should have more knowledge of the underpinning theories. A training/ workshop (preferable in the intercultural setting, with the colleagues) to guide through the theory and to dialogue on own and others' perspectives with people from different cultures would give better results.

Agree	Partly agree	Disagree
Justification:		

**Thank you for filling in this last questionnaire and for your participation in this research project!**

## Time schedule

### *The first discussion round:*

September 18 (today): You received the first questionnaire enclosed with this same e-mail.

Friday September 29: This is the final date to send back your answers on the first questionnaire and become a member of the panel of experts.

### *Second discussion round:*

Friday October 20: You will receive the synthesis report of the first questionnaire and a second questionnaire.

Friday October 27 : This is the final date to send back your answers on the second questionnaire.

### *Third and last discussion round:*

Friday November 24: You will receive the synthesis report of the second questionnaire and maybe a third questionnaire.

Monday December 11: This is the final date to send back your eventual comments and if necessary the answers on the third questionnaire.

