NONVIOLENT
PEACEFORCE

Nonviolent Peaceforce

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL
COMPETENCE

TRAINING
REPORT

JANUARY · 2020

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) is an international non-governmental organisation that provides physical, unarmed protection to civilians caught in violent conflicts and subsequent crises. Founded in 2002, NP current program locations include South Sudan, Iraq, Myanmar and Philippines. The organisation's headquarters are based in Geneva, Switzerland.

NP's work can be interpreted as a form of intercultural cooperation that aims to deter violence by creating conditions for conflicting parties to address the roots of the conflict. Development of intercultural competence can help improve this cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary assistance context is characterised by extreme cultural diversity. Humanitarian agencies encompass staff from multiple nationalities and bring together actors whose perceptions, priorities, and modes of working have developed in different cultural contexts.

In 2017, the humanitarian sector involved approximately 529,000 national and 40,700 international field personnel operating across 134 countries with an estimated 201 million people in need of assistance (ALNAP, 2018; Development Initiatives, 2018). While the overlap of distinct cultures does not necessarily present a conflict, it can lead to misunderstandings, compromising the effectiveness of humanitarian organisations and their efforts.

In such settings, the capability to shift cultural perspective and act in culturally appropriate ways – defined as **intercultural competence** – constitutes the organising process that permeates all levels of organisational performance. It allows for proper planning, implementation and monitoring of aid programs, supports humanitarian access negotiations and acceptance of projects, and helps recognise the needs of the affected populations.

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Intercultural competence reflects the degree to which cultural differences and commonalities in values, expectations, beliefs, and practices are effectively bridged, an inclusive environment is achieved, and specific differences that exist in organisations are addressed from a mutual adaptation perspective.

This report provides an overview of 6 cultural diversity trainings conducted over a course of a month across 3 countries – Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines – to more than 400 participants – humanitarian aid workers, military officials, students, academics, and government representatives coming from at least 17 different ethnicities.

Training objectives included exploring the impact of intercultural competence development in humanitarian emergencies and proposing targeted interventions to increase intercultural effectiveness of aid workers and other stakeholders, support cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment, and contribute to diversity and inclusion efforts.

Despite the ongoing talks between the Myanmar Army and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), communities across the country continue to endure inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflicts.

As part of NP's Participatory Action Research Project, conducted in the Northern Shan State, this training was held to develop intercultural competence of local peace workers, research participants, and address challenges of bringing deeply divided, ethically diverse groups together.

Shan State, multi-ethnic and home to several armed ethnic groups, has been in the crossfire for decades. Cultural differences, learned and shared by groups defined by distinct ethnicities, have complicated efforts at reconciliation. This session focused on increasing participants' cultural self-understanding, promoting curiosity, and providing information on cultural similarities.

The training covered cultural stereotypes and cultural generalisations to increase awareness of value judgments and assumed standards of comparison. Through a simulation-based exercise, participants practiced withholding their judgments before establishing 'facts' whilst recognising that 'facts' exist in cultural contexts.

The process of category creation and recognition – by which cultural differences are engaged with – was further illustrated by the Language Envelopes exercise. By sorting through various items received in an envelope and organising them into different categories (in accordance to their colour, size, shape or function), participants observed the tendency to ascribe meaning and value to items – as well as people – in accordance to their cultural backgrounds.

Questions related to power – for example, what are the sources of categorisation? Who perpetuates the use of stereotypes and/or assumptions and are they discriminatory? – were raised to explore why those assumed to belong to certain categories are unable to influence the process of their creation nor alter beliefs held about them.

The training was closed with the R.S.V.P. exercise by which participants had to come up with creative solutions to problem statements provided by the trainer. The exercise tested everyone's ability to work in diverse groups, draw on common experiences and expertise, and address relevant intercultural challenges.

PATTANI, THAILAND
JANUARY · 15 · 2020

The South Thailand insurgency has occurred over several periods during the 20th century and has become increasingly violent since early 2000s. Stemming from long-running tensions between the Thai state and a minority population – Malay Muslims – the ongoing violent unrest has divided communities along ethnic and religious lines.

Although Malay Muslims make up a majority of the Southern Thailand population, they are a minority at the national level – only a little over 2% of the country's total population (The Asia Foundation, 2013). The conflict has touched on sensitive issues of national identity, inequality and perceptions of injustice.

Conducted at the infantry division of the Royal Thai Army in Pattani, Thailand, this training introduced intercultural competence development as a means of opening up channels of communication at various levels of society.

Officers at the civic engagement unit observed that even though communities in Pattani are **multi**cultural, in light of the ongoing grievances, they are not yet **inter**cultural – ethnic groups, though living alongside one another, do not engage with each other.

To help create a more intercultural society and address some of the deeply entrenched causes of conflict, officers were presented with the **Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)** – a theory-based assessment of intercultural competence that indicates a groups' progression along a validated, cross-cultural continuum.

Training participants discussed the IDI's application amongst staff stationed in Pattani and considered ways to encourage exchange of ideas, cultural norms and development of deep relationships.

Prince of Songkla University (PSU) is the first university established in Southern Thailand. It consists of four campuses - Hat Yai, Phuket, Surat Thani, and Pattani. The latter was founded in 1968 and is considered to be the first permanent campus.

Due to conflict escalation in the southernmost provinces, there has been a decline in the number of students applying to programs at Pattani campus. While in the past, applicants used to come from all over the country, the current student population consists primarily of Malay Muslims.

Recognising this change in student demographics and the deeply entrenched ethnic sensitivities, a lecture was held to discuss intercultural competence development through the means of the IDI. Students majoring in International Relations, Human Security, International Communication, and Human Rights shared their insights on the subject relating theory to real-life examples.

Specifically, this lecture discuss the importance of developing intercultural competence in complex humanitarian crisis. It has the potential to improve performance of aid agencies by ensuring greater diversity and inclusion within workplace, helping to build credible relationships with local actors, and preventing cultural misunderstandings.

Students observed that being interculturally competent does not imply 'giving up' one's unique cultural practices; rather, it allows for treating cultural experiences in relative terms in ways that do not violate one's own cultural values but also respect the other culture group's laws and values.

In response to changing student demographics, the University's approach to managing diversity had to be re-examined. This training, delivered to the academic and support staff at the Pattani campus, focused on strategies for creating an inclusive learning environment.

Participants were invited to increase their knowledge of cultural frameworks and behaviours to better understand and be understood within culturally diverse surroundings. The session included targeted, multicultural activities, such as Language Envelopes and R.S.V.P., and discussed the IDI's application across different study programs.

It was observed that diversity alone does not guarantee inclusion of everyone's unique cultural backgrounds. If poorly managed, increased diversity may lead to misunderstandings and, at times, conflict.

Yet, by intentionally taking the perspective of alternative cultural views, interculturally competent University staff could come up with teaching strategies that promote a sense of belonging and design courses that support all students.

As observed by faculty and staff, developing intercultural competence allows for making better sense of situations in response to different cultural expectations and engage in adaptive behaviours based on those expectations.

> **AS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BECOME REGARDED AS A RESOURCE FOR MULTICULTURAL TEAMS, A STRONGER CLIMATE OF RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY IS ESTABLISHED**

NP is a multicultural organisation. In 2019, NP staff involved 91 internationals and 164 nationals operating across South Sudan, Iraq, Myanmar and the Philippines. At present, the total number of field staff is comprised of at least 53 different nationalities.

In addition to working in diverse teams, NP provides unarmed civilian protection in some of the most ethnically and culturally distinctive contexts. For example, NP's mission in the Philippines, based in Cotabato, Mindanao region, is exposed to at least 20 ethnolinguistic groups.

In such settings, the ability to shift perspective and act in culturally appropriate ways is considered key. NP's success in building peace side by side with local communities in conflicts driven by ethnic intolerance is better served when its staff is able to more deeply understand culturally learned differences, recognise commonalities between themselves and others, and is able to act on this increased insight.

To support NP Philippines efforts at engaging with cultural diversity both internally and externally, this day-long workshop had three objectives: (1) introduce intercultural communication theory and models, (2) measure levels of intercultural competence of NP Philippines program staff by administrating the IDI, and (3) design an Intercultural Development Plan.

The first two objectives were achieved during the morning session. The acquired IDI scores were indicative of a tendency to highlight commonalities across cultures, which, although positive in light of NP's mission in Mindanao, may limit the group's ability to recognise cultural differences and integrate them into common goals, policies and practices across the organisation.

Having their IDI scores in mind, program staff spent the afternoon designing intercultural competence development goals. Collectively, the team decided to focus on (1) achieving greater inclusivity within NP and (2) building social cohesion among NP

stakeholders. The group also determined progress indicators and barriers that could interfere with achievement of the set goals. The workshop was closed by reviewing the Intercultural Development Plan and agreeing on a timeline. Training participants were offered to receive their individual IDI scores by scheduling an online debrief session.

COTABATO, PHILIPPINES
JANUARY · 22 · 2020

Conflict in Mindanao has brought together numerous international as well as national humanitarian organisations. Over the past years, it became apparent that although distributors and receivers of aid strive to contribute to sustaining peace, they tend to do so from different cultural perspectives.

This session addressed challenges of designing culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches to humanitarian assistance. Local non-governmental organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies and government representatives share their best practices and

observed that when it comes to cultural diversity trainings in humanitarian sector, focus is often placed on increasing awareness rather than developing specific skills.

Knowledge of one's own and other cultures, while essential for recognising differences in behaviour and values, does not necessarily lead to possession of competence – the ability to apply appropriate action in various cultural contexts.

Recognising this, participants discussed intercultural competence development within their respective organisations, considered how diverse their working environments are, and identified specific intercultural challenges relevant to their positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Define what respecting different cultures means in terms of day-to-day operations**
  Humanitarian organisations have become increasingly aware that being able to act in culturally appropriate ways is an intrinsic part of successful running of their operations. However, few agencies are able to indicate what 'respecting cultural differences' means in practice. Cultural differences ought to be approached as the starting point for thinking about humanitarian response in order to prevent imposition of cultural biases on the way situations are analysed and which priorities are identified.

- **Deploy the IDI to develop intercultural competence**
  Humanitarian agencies, such as NP, should use the IDI for designing training efforts that target its staff's intercultural competence development needs. In terms of organisational development, the IDI group and individual profiles should provide guidance for policies, practices, and required structural changes to help achieve organisational goals. Additionally, the IDI should inform program development and redesign; it ought to be administered to individuals and groups prior induction processes and after completing their missions to determine the degree by which their intercultural competence has improved.

- **Design targeted, developmental learning interventions**
  Instead of encouraging learning by doing and organising short-term or one-off training programs, humanitarian agencies ought to facilitate cooperative conversations and actions directed toward continuous growth, for achieving competence is an inherently developmental process.

- **Engage all levels of organisation in the IDI assessment**
  In order to better understand how development of intercultural competence could contribute to improving performance of entire organisations, considerations should be made to increase the number of staff tested by the IDI by involving senior management and operations staff. This would provide a more accurate estimation of the organisation's levels of intercultural competence and help devise more relevant intervention strategies.

- **Create an Intercultural Development Plan**
  To intentionally reflect on cultural commonalities and differences experienced within workplace, humanitarian agencies should set targeted, developmental goals and process indicators and become able to mitigate intercultural challenges that may occur as barriers to goal attainment.

CONCLUSION

Success in the 21st century requires powerful intercultural competence, which is essential for transcending ethnocentrism and establishing effective, positive relations across cultural boundaries both internationally and domestically.

Intercultural competence development has the potential to:
- **facilitate** cooperative conversations and actions directed towards growth
- **support** organisational development in culturally diverse settings
- **achieve** diversity and inclusion
- **support** global leadership development
- **increase** multicultural activities
- **ensure** targeted, developmental learning
- **provide** insight into intercultural challenges and outcomes of intercultural contact
- **clarify** intercultural goals important to the organisation
- **uncover** assumptions and re-frame understanding of past events and incidents

> **ALL ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES WERE MEANINGFUL AND CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE SESSION'S OBJECTIVES. THE IDI IS A GOOD TOOL FOR MEASURING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE, WHICH IS CRUCIAL TO MULTICULTURAL ORGANISATIONS, SUCH AS NP**
>
> – participant of trainings conducted in Cotabato, Philippines

This report contains the following findings:
- Intercultural competence development can help bring together deeply divided, ethnically diverse communities
- Living in a multicultural environment does not mean that cultural differences are engaged with and intercultural interactions are established
- Intercultural competence development can help improve organisational performance of humanitarian agencies by supporting their operations
- An inclusive working environment is achieved when differences in values, beliefs, and expectations are addressed from a mutual adaptation perspective
- Interculturally competent behaviour occurs at a level supported by the individual's or group's underlying orientation assessed by the IDI
- Training efforts at building intercultural competence are more successful when they are based on the individual's or group's underlying developmental orientation assessed by the IDI

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TYPES OF TRAINING

CULTURAL DIVERSITY TRAINING
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE TESTING
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT
TAILORED TRAINING