



Embracing cultures



Ariane Curdy acquired a multidisciplinary University degree in household economy and nutrition (dipl. oec. troph., JLU Giessen). She first worked for MSF France (until 1988),

and then joined ICRC's HQ in Geneva as a nutritionist. Over the past 14 years, she has completed over 40 missions, working in countries in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, Central America, Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. Ariane completed a Masters Degree in International Management in Amsterdam. Since then she has become an independent consultant working on intercultural issues (CTRL: CuLTure ReLations). Ariane approached the ENN and suggested writing a series of articles for Field Exchange. Given Ariane's reputation and extensive experience of emergency nutrition in the field we accepted without reservation. She explains below the purpose and scope of the series - 'Embracing Cultures'.

Likewise, when I worked with Tuaregs, I was often told "Oh, you have blue eyes". At first I was flattered and took this as a compliment. However, I later met a camel driver who told me that camels with blue eyes, a kind of albino camel, are real nuisances. They suffer from bad eyesight at night and consequently often get lost when camel caravans move in the dark. From that day onward I kept my dark sunglasses on whenever I talked to a Tuareg!

These little incidents showed me that different backgrounds and past experiences imply that we didn't always share the same perceptions. We were not giving equivalent meaning to the same information. In the workplace there were lots of potential for miscommunication. At times, what I assumed my colleagues would understand from what I said, and what they actually understood were worlds apart. Although these incidents mostly remained hidden, they still created unspoken misunderstandings and confusion on both sides.

Another source of misunderstanding comes from the way information is transmitted. With the first rains, grass started to grow around my hut. I loved this green touch, and didn't react to the various comments of my many visitors that I should cut it. That is, until I walked home one night and had a scary encounter with a snake in front of my hut. Next morning, when I related my adventure, everybody said "but we had

told you to cut the grass". For them, the statement "you should cut the grass" had clearly implied this would avoid attracting snakes. For me, it had simply meant the grass was long and needed cutting. How come? The Nigerians are a so-called High Context (HC) culture:¹ in their communication most of the information is either in the physical context (grass = snakes) or internalised in the person (one always cuts the grass for this reason). Only very little of the information is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. As a native of a Low-Context-Culture (LC) Switzerland, I am used to transmitting and receiving messages as an explicit code (grass attracts snakes; cut it). Subsequently, I began to have an improved understanding of the dialogue in the endless meetings I was attending as part of my job. My initial perception in these meetings was that people related in an indirect, evasive and even "aimless" way (HC), whereas I kept on trying to be as precise, specific and transparent as possible. But slowly, I got used to the "palavers", and realised that HC communication is an art that can be very efficient. However, for an outsider, much time has to be devoted to "self-programming" first.

The challenge to establish a mutual and efficient understanding between people grows as the number of cultures working together increases. In the town's hospital, three international organisations were working in the paediatric ward. A middle-aged Chinese paediatrician was in charge of the service, supported by an American nurse, while a French nurse of Lebanese origin was running the feeding centre. Nigerian nurses were joining this multinational team for regular shifts. To have four different medical approaches within one structure was one major source of tension. In addition to not sharing any common language, communication problems about these differences created frustration and were a further source of tension. If major clashes were avoided, this was in a large way due to the regular presence of the Chinese translator, who not only mastered all languages, but also knew how to "bridge" the different communication approaches and prevent them colliding with each other (China and Niger (HC) vs. USA and France (LC)). This skill remains an art rarely taught to expatriates leaving for field missions.

Misunderstandings related to different forms of verbal communication are often apparent. But this only represents one of the many types of cross-cultural differences aid workers face when working in the field.

¹ See Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*, Anchor Books 1989

Whenever we work for an international humanitarian organisation, we will probably be forced to deal with cultures others than our own. This necessitates interacting socially and communicating meaningfully, but also being aware and tolerant of the differences in behaviour and thinking patterns. Each culture has its own way of dealing with human relations, addressing tasks, understanding leadership, negotiating, making decisions ... or simply managing time. Misunderstandings are therefore frequent, although not always obvious. This series of articles will relate first-hand experiences of cultural differences and/or misunderstandings in the field, and will hopefully provide useful information and tools at the same time. I hope these experiences will help other fieldworkers identify and overcome similar intercultural issues and problems in the field.

'Never trust a camel with blue eyes'

During my university years, I dreamt of working in Latin America or Asia. But upon graduation, I was offered a first assignment to Niger instead! This first mission of 18 months had a striking effect on me: I fell in love with Africa.

Initially, I considered myself lucky to work in a French-speaking country, imagining that communication would be no problem for a native French speaker. Although I easily picked up Hausa, a relatively straightforward language, I soon learned that sharing the same language was no guarantee of mutual understanding.

It all began with little, and rather funny, misunderstandings on a social level. The first few months of my mission, I really enjoyed the permanently shining sun. Every morning, I'd step out of my compound, and comment on how beautiful the day was only to be met by puzzled looks. Yet when the rainy season finally started, it was my Nigerian colleagues who greeted me in the morning with an "Ahhh, what a beautiful day" and a big smile. What is more basic than to talk about weather? Our perception of the weather was just so different!