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Cover Page Footnote

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The Best Intentions: An Exploration of Cross-cultural Interactions and Humanitarian Aid in Rural Mozambique

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Abstract

In 2019 the East African nation of Mozambique, currently ranked as having one of the lowest GDPs per capita in the world, suffered the impact of two devastating cyclones in as many months. In response to the damage inflicted, various international humanitarian teams directed their efforts to distribute emergency aid throughout the country, including in remote island and inland communities along the coast. This paper explores the effect of cross-cultural interactions on the distribution of aid within these rural communities via the lenses of Cultural Anthropology and theories of cross-cultural communications. Through a brief case study of the interactions between primarily international aid workers and the local recipients of aid, we can examine the influence of differences in culture, race, and class status on communication during the distribution of aid in a post-colonial nation. The insight for this topic comes from both scholarly sources, such as anthropologist Clifford Geertz, as well as anecdotal insights from primary sources, including my own reflections on personal experiences as an aid worker in Mozambique. This paper suggests ways in which inherited values, conceptions, and internalized histories may form barriers to communication and asks in what ways, if any, these barriers impacted the effective distribution of emergency aid in rural Mozambique.

Keywords: Cultural Anthropology, Emergency Relief, Culture, Cultural Dimensions Theory

Introduction

The devastation stretches for hundreds of kilometers. Communities across regions of northern Mozambique, as well as parts of Malawi and Zimbabwe, have been leveled by 120 mph winds and rising floodwaters. Beira, a coastal Mozambican city of half a million, has been flattened, with 90% of its buildings destroyed. In already impoverished communities, people cling to roofs and trees that the winds have not yet torn away. As homes made of bamboo and mud are reduced to twisted piles of rubble, many are left without a change of clothes or even a pot in which to cook. An entire year's harvest has been lost as fields are submerged beneath 10 meters of water, the result of months' worth of rainfall being delivered in a matter of hours. Clean water is inaccessible. People are forced to drink from waters that carry the remains of those caught in the storm surge. Hospitals lacking electricity and water and with only scarce medical supplies are inundated with patients who stand in line for hours awaiting medical care. The shadows of malnutrition and disease loom as they will soon be of pressing concern.

On the 14th of March 2019, the category 4 Cyclone Idai made landfall near Beira in central Mozambique. In the following month, Cyclone Kenneth would deal another blow, landing just 600 miles north of Idai's impact zone. With winds of up to 137mph, Kenneth would prove to be the most intense cyclone to hit the African continent in recorded history (UN News, 2020; Reid, 2020).

The cyclones affected many, with some 600 lives lost, over 1,600 injured and an estimated 2.2 million people requiring urgent assistance (UN News, 2020). According to estimates by the United Nations, Cyclone Idai and the flooding that followed resulted in \$773 million of damage to crops, infrastructure, and buildings and the loss of some 100,000 homes.

Cyclone Kenneth in turn resulted in an additional \$100 million in damage. Hundreds of thousands have been made homeless or displaced (Reid, 2020). These figures may indeed fall short of the reality. In the aftermath of the disaster, the UN announced emergency levels of insecurity for those affected (UN News, 2020). The combined impacts of cyclones Idai and Kenneth have since been labelled one of the worst weather-related disasters to ever occur in the Southern Hemisphere (Yuhua, 2019).

The response to the cyclones was massive in kind. NGOs including the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, the United Nations, UNICEF, Samaritan's Purse, and more, responded by sending emergency response teams to assist with rescue operations and the distribution of aid. Firefighters from the Brazilian National Force were received in Mozambique to assist in rescues and distributions, as were other emergency response teams from around the globe (Agência Brasil, 2019). Relief efforts were enormous with hundreds of tons of food, and thousands of tarps and medical kits distributed in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province alone (Iris Global, 2019).

In the wake of the cyclones, international NGOs such as the United Nations partnered with the Mozambican government and long-term missions and relief groups within the nation to coordinate relief efforts. Relief teams were frequently comprised of both Mozambican nationals and international aid workers as they labored side by side. As in any crisis situation, tensions were high, and time was not an available luxury. Desperation among recipients of aid occasionally led to riots over food availability, and concerns regarding security served to put further strain on teams. In such a taxing scenario, the potential for conflict, both amongst relief workers and between relief workers and recipients of aid, is exacerbated.

Of particular interest to this project is the question of whether different cultural backgrounds potentially form the basis for conflict through miscommunication and misunderstanding. Thus, this presentation seeks to examine ways in which culture (i.e. inherited values, conceptions, and internalized histories) may form barriers to communication and asks in what ways, if any, these barriers impacted the effective distribution of emergency aid in rural Mozambique.

My research consists of interviews of first-hand observers involved in the events following the cyclones, including team leaders, those involved in the distribution of aid, and long-term residents of Mozambique. Those interviewed worked in close coordination with representatives of the previously listed NGOs in the relief efforts following the cyclones.

The contribution of this project is to bring to light how different cultural backgrounds, particularly when coupled with a situation where tensions are high, may complicate the process of relief distribution. By demonstrating different types of potential cultural differences using examples and narrative experience in the context of relief efforts in Mozambique, we may see theory exemplified by lived experience. Culture is never uniform nor static. It is often simultaneously palpable yet illusive. However, these anecdotes allow us to observe it.

Discussion of Theory

The discussion around how to understand the concept of culture is enormous. Indeed, even within a specific field such as anthropology, definitions of culture, each with varying levels of specificity, are nearly innumerable. However, to proceed, we must employ an operational definition for the sake of this discussion. Although this project draws on sources from multiple disciplines, it most closely aligns with that of cultural anthropology. Therefore, it is from the anthropological tradition that we source our definition of culture.

As defined by renowned cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, culture is “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (as cited in Britannica, 2019, para. 3). According to this interpretation, the purpose of culture is to enable us to develop and apply meaning, molding our understanding of the world around us. A definition that diverges slightly from Geertz’s emphasis on the symbolic nature of culture comes from medical anthropologist Patricia Hudelson (2004). She states that culture may be summarily defined as “the shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behaviour that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself” (p. 345). Put simply, culture is the learned, shared knowledge that people use to generate behavior and that shapes how we understand and assign meaning to the world. It is worthwhile to note that anthropologists have long pointed out that within nearly every cultural society, there exist many overlapping, coexisting, and mutually influencing sub-cultures (Hudelson, 2004).

As described by Geertz, what defines anthropology as a discipline is an elaborate venture in understanding the deeper rationale behind people’s actions. This attempt to see the deeper meaning behind seemingly inexplicable preferences is a practice which Geertz termed “thick description”. For example, while someone from one cultural background might understand the closure of an eyelid as merely a twitch, they may be missing the deeper meaning it conveys as a wink or a private communication. A simple eye twitch, as a wink, carries meaning but is only understood via contextual knowledge. Thick description deals with many complex, multifaceted, and intermingled conceptual structures that while seemingly inexplicable and illogical to someone viewing them from the outside, must be considered to understand people’s motivations and actions (Geertz, 2017).

We must acknowledge that our experiences and inherited ways of understanding our world shade our view of others. They influence (although perhaps do not determine) our interpretation of the actions and intentions of others. This is not prohibitively problematic for our desire to examine how culture impacted interactions of the aid distribution process. It is not prohibitive precisely because we are examining how this veil of understanding may have produced instances of tension or disagreement. It is relevant to state that this project does not seek to make the argument that there are certain cultures that are better suited to the process of “development”, to promoting human progress and prosperity. Rather, it examines how differences in interpretation and understanding, shaped by cultural backgrounds, may serve as sources of misunderstanding and conflict.

This project does not explore some of the facets of culture that may typically be brought to mind. Instead of exploring traditional dance, song, or religion the discussion focuses on norms of interaction and communication. These types of norms and unconscious perceptions are those that have the potential to impact relief efforts, rather than cultural products such as folklore that one might find in a twentieth century ethnography.

As one interviewee stated, the aftermath of a natural disaster is like war time. The good in the situation is that people are drawn together as they labor for a common goal. The gray area is the struggles that good intentioned people have working together, particularly when differing cultural backgrounds are concerned. When examining cross-cultural interaction, conflict or misunderstanding is more likely when the two cultures are very different than when they are similar. This difference is referred to as “cultural distance” (Triandis, 2000). For example, cultural distance is greater when there is a language difference. Another potential cause of cross-cultural frustration is that people do not perceive the same “causes” of behavior. We often

assume the motivations of others, but our interpretations are shaped by our cultural viewpoint. Although someone's motivation for an action may seem obvious to an outside observer, or perhaps conversely, they appear inexplicable, it must be understood that there is a deeper underlying logic to an individual's decisions. This underlying understanding of the world forms the basis for our decisions and is not always easily seen or understood by an outsider. This is what leads to a mis-labeling of people's intentions.

During the conducted interviews, several types of cultural differences were brought up frequently. The cultural styles that surfaced during the interviews are those that often differ between people of western backgrounds, as relief workers frequently were, and people of Mozambique. The specific cultural styles that are examined in this paper are those of perceptions of cultural tightness, power distance, individualistic versus collectivistic orientations, and time versus event orientations.

Cultural Tightness

Norms are the culturally defined rules that determine what is understood as acceptable behavior. The product of inherited values and perceptions, norms are often facets of tacit culture, that is to say, they are often unconscious and taken for granted. Norms govern our interactions with others, how we understand seniority, and our conceptions of proper communication. In "tight" cultures, there are more rules, or norms, and more expectations around what is correct behavior. Conversely, loose cultures are characterized as having fewer rules or norms. As is the case with the other cultural styles we will discuss further on, cultural tightness may be thought of as existing as a spectrum. Rather than cultures either being "tight" or "loose", they exist along a continuum where some cultures may be more, "tight" relative to others. Higher levels of cultural

tightness are more likely to be found in places where people are more interdependent, such as in more collectivistic cultures like Mozambique (Triandis, 2000).

Cultural tightness may manifest itself in numerous ways. Drawing on past personal experiences working in Mozambique as an example, perceptions regarding the propriety of consuming alcohol and the importance of modesty of dress come to mind. Compared to relatively relaxed views regarding the consumption of alcohol in the West, Mozambique is typically more culturally tight. Likewise, the importance associated with modesty of dress (the norm that shorts should reach beyond the knee for example), is more significant than in much of western culture.

Power Distance

Borrowed from Geert Hofstede's (1992) four dimensions of culture, the second cultural style we will examine is that of power distance. Defined succinctly, the cultural style of power distance has to do with the cultural understanding of the rigidity of hierarchy. In a cultural climate where high power distance is a norm, decisions tend to be made "at the top" rather than by debate among all levels of the hierarchy. If everyone is talking, who is in charge and who do you believe? Seniority is respected and considered when determining how communication is delivered. In low power-distance cultures, the concept of hierarchy is less rigid and the norms surrounding communications with superiors are less strict. While hierarchies still exist, their main function is convenience, and less formal interactions with superiors may be encouraged (Pomerantz, 2004).

In the west, particularly in America, there is a culture of discussion in the form of argument and contention. Rooted in ideas of individualism and equality, there is an idea that if you speak often, and loudly, you may prevail. Conversely, a person operating from a high

power-distance culture might view this means of communication as insubordination, and an ineffective means of decision making. In the case of cross-cultural interactions between people from high and low power-distance backgrounds, one party may be perceived as abrasive or speaking out of turn while the other's silence may be misunderstood as agreement or even a lack of opinion. This creates the opportunity for gross miscommunication (Pomerantz, 2004).

While working in northern Mozambique myself, the idea of power distance and its accompanying respect for authority made itself apparent. Elders and those in respected positions were addressed by title as a sign of respect and local chieftains (chiefs) were the first to be greeted when beginning work in a village.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

A culture's level of orientation towards individualism or collectivism has to do with the emphasis that is placed on the individual relative to the larger community they are a part of. In individualistic cultures such as are found in much of the west, the goals and personal agency of the individual are emphasized. In cultures with more collectivistic orientations such as Mozambique, the wellbeing of the family group or broader community form the basic unit. Interaction and collective benefit are emphasized over the agency of a single person. Where an individualistic orientation might encourage autonomy and self-reliance, a collectivistic orientation is more likely to emphasize interdependence and cooperation (Pomerantz, 2004). Mozambican culture is one in which the communal whole is prioritized rather than individual, and communities and families typically share amongst one another, providing support where needed. People help each other because they know they themselves may be in need of help next month.

These different cultural styles may also manifest in terms of language use. As described by cross-cultural Harry Triandis (2000), “Collectivists use action verbs (e.g. he offered to help) rather than state verbs (e.g. he is helpful). This is because they prefer to use context in their communications” (p. 147). Tying into the previously mentioned concept of power distance, in a collectivistic culture an individual may be discouraged from engaging in contentious discussion because the preferred aim is to “speak with one voice” (Pomerantz, 2004).

Time vs. Event Orientations

Having different conceptions of time, and of the importance of punctuality, can be a major source of frustration between parties from different cultural backgrounds. Cultures that have time orientations operate on “clock time”, meaning they understand time in objective quantifiable units and the end of tasks are bound to the external regulation of the clock. In cultures with event orientations, time is measured relative to the task in question and tasks are planned relative to one another. The context of the situation has much more to do with what is considered being “on time” than does the artificial conception of clock time. An event is done when the task is completed. For example, work follows the completion of breakfast and dinner happens when the workday is completed. Event orientation as a cultural tendency is more common in cultures that also have high levels of power distance and collectivism, such as Mozambique (Avnet & Sellier, 2011).

People from the West tend to associate punctuality with courtesy and respect, whereas people from more event-oriented cultures tend to view time as flexible and recognize that juggling is often inevitable. Having a deadline just for the sake of having a deadline is seen as artificial and problematic. It also may be disrespectful in that it assumes that the deadline makes

that task the priority above all else. A strict time orientation compartmentalizes and removes personal context from a situation (Pomerantz, 2004).

While working in Mozambique a few years ago, I had a great primer lesson in understanding the difference between clock driven and event driven time. I had been invited to a morning football practice with a local club team and was told practice would begin at 5 am. And so, at 5 am sharp the next morning, there I was. Alone. After a good 45 minutes of waiting in puzzled silence, the rest of the team arrived. I quickly learned my lesson in flexible timeframes.

These different conceptions of time influence the stereotype that in Africa, nothing gets done, or at least, that nothing gets done efficiently. “They don’t care enough to be punctual or to finish the job” is a common refrain. This sort of statement is a perfect example of how cross-cultural relationships can be frustrated by different time orientations and serves as a legitimizing rationale to explain why the behavior is inferior. Despite the tendency for this difference to cause great irritation, it should be noted that experiments show both orientations can be effective, countering ethnocentric notions. It is simply that a time orientation generally relates to an emphasis on efficiency while an event orientation, emphasizes effectiveness (Avnet & Sellier, 2011).

Evidence and Evaluation

When examining subjects related to culture, much of what we study is immaterial, and unquantifiable. In anthropology, researchers have traditionally employed qualitative research methods to address some of the more abstract facets of culture. Qualitative research allows for the inclusion of context and seeks to understand values, norms, actions, and events. The flexible nature of qualitative research allows us to probe at understanding people’s motivations, their

understanding of the world, and the impact of situational context on the phenomenon being examined (Hudelson, 2004).

The research for this project consisted of interviews of first-hand observers of the events following the cyclones, including team leaders, those involved in the distribution of aid, and citizens of Mozambique. Four individuals were interviewed in total. All those interviewed worked in close coordination with representatives from NGOs that assisted in the relief efforts following cyclones Idai and Kenneth and were on the ground running operations. The informants interviewed have requested that they retain their anonymity so as not to harm relationships necessary for future relief efforts.

The examples taken from these interviews allow us to observe the previously described cultural styles through anecdotes and lived examples. Cultural differences and resulting misalignments in understanding can cause uncertainty and anxiety. This can serve as an inhibition to the relief process. This analysis does not seek to evaluate a specific culture. Rather, by applying cultural styles such as power distance to anecdotes and examples, it attempts to evaluate how intercultural interactions affected the process of aid distribution. The examples provided by interviewees suggest that while cultural differences did appear, sometimes leading to conflict, they did not have a significant impact upon the effectiveness of relief efforts.

Throughout the interview process, understandings of power distance seem to have had the most significant impact on relief efforts as concepts of power distance directly affect the process of making decisions regarding logistics and strategy. This was especially apparent as it pertained to interactions between relief organizers and local leadership. Foreign relief workers were often described as being highly “type A”, that they came into situations with prefabricated formulas to import and a triaged response. Interviewees stated that foreign relief personnel often

brought with them a great deal of experience working in similar disaster situations. Here is where a challenge presents itself. While incoming relief workers often have great knowledge in their field, they must work with local leadership to coordinate effectively. Frequently, the priorities of relief workers and what local government thought should be done did not align perfectly. As described by one interviewee and citizen of Mozambique:

“We had the conflict of having minds from the top relief organizations in the world, along with the representatives of the relief organization of Mozambique and then the local chiefs of the region. They would all convene in making decisions. But you have this dramatic decrease in levels of experience in conflict resolution and in dealing with catastrophes on a large scale. You have all these people making decisions in the room and the least experienced may have the most power. People must bite their tongues and hope the power will do what the more experienced know is right. All this in a bamboo shack on an island. Everyone is just a human being and has their own idea of what it looks like to save the country.”

In a situation such as the one described above, there is a great potential for misunderstanding and frustration to arise, particularly regarding power distance. Traditional norms of how to address chiefs and local leaders must be considered, and context is important.

As stated by the above informant:

“In this kind of culture, it’s more about how you say things. You must be caring and kind. If you are not respectful, people will not want to speak to you. And if you are just direct, you may not get told you are being like that. People might just not cooperate. Things just get postponed and people won’t attend to you as a priority.”

The importance of respect for local leadership and of consideration for how to address them was further described by an informant who worked as a liaison between international NGOs and an established missions and relief organization in Mozambique:

“You do see that the chiefs of the villages, when people come in, it doesn’t matter who they are, but if they speak in a way that is belittling, you can see it in their demeanor. The chiefs become sad from it. They tolerate it because they need the aid that these workers bring but you see it’s hurtful.”

Referring to international aid workers and the impact circumventing traditions of respect can have:

“They come in to help but they have this unknown inner arrogance and local people feel this. So instead of being able to help, local people react to this arrogance. People’s attitudes get in the way.”

The necessity of proper communication and respect in the relief process cannot be overstated. Foreign organizations may have the money and yet the local leadership has the authority. Local leadership needs access to resources but also desires to retain the independence to do what it believes is best for its people. The conflict arises when one party tries to impose the course of action it determines to be best rather than compromise on a solution. Despite this, local leaders most often do manage to reach an agreement with the incoming organization and recognize that organization’s expertise. As one interviewee stated, the people who are trained to work in crisis situations know how to separate business from emotion. The vast majority of both foreigners and nationals who organized relief efforts were described as having operated in a highly professional manner.

Differences in orientation toward individualism versus collectivism were also apparent in the interview process. As described by the previous informant and liaison, Mozambican culture is a beautiful one in which they prioritize the whole rather than the individual. Communities and families share amongst one another as necessary. The interviewee portrayed the differences in orientations with this anecdote:

“I see westerners hiding snacks in their bags. If you see a Mozambican with a cookie and there are ten people, everyone will get a piece. At the same time, you see westerners in their tents munching on their own snacks. The local culture is a culture of sharing and community. That’s their normal but western cultures prioritize this sort of survival of the fittest mentality.”

Although stashing away a few snack bars may seem to be an inconsequential matter, it can be these types of trivial incidents that cause irritation to build in multinational teams. Where one party sees selfishness, the other party feels wholly justified.

Another example of collectivistic orientation came from a citizen of Mozambique involved in aid work when they stated, “Everyone is connected to family and so you have to approach a village as a whole. Don’t even approach the village without being able to feed everyone or you’re going to have conflict”. The informant described riots around food distribution as a not infrequent occurrence when there were not sufficient supplies for the whole group. It is fair to state that this is just as likely the result of starvation as it is any sort of cultural inclination. However, even despite conditions of starvation that drove people to the point of eating raw rice upon its delivery, food supplies were shared amongst the community and family.

Having different understandings of time is understandable, and can be a common source of frustration. However, throughout my interviews, it was often stated that these differences were an infrequent source of conflict during relief efforts following the cyclones. Throughout the

organization of relief teams, the coordination of various moving parts and the lack of excess time necessitated a common recognition of the importance of punctuality and haste. As one team leader told me:

“I think that we are an event-oriented culture, but when you’re talking about food aid and doing distributions it isn’t a determining factor. When you have a helicopter that’s going to pick you up and drop you off and the helicopter is being paid, and you have to work in daylight, it’s not so much about the event. You have to respect the time limit that’s been given. Often, we are working in districts that are very dangerous and you need to ensure the safety of your team, so you need to follow the safety protocols and schedules provided. For example, if you are working with tides, you can’t miss your high tide and get beached. Even though it is an event-oriented culture, when you’re working on a mission you must respect protocols.”

Although different conceptions of time were present between international relief workers and locals, their effect was sufficiently mitigated by clear and open communication. One example is taken from the situation described above. As tides were shifting late in the day and the sun was going down, the team was forced to cut their distributions short and return the following day. To quote one team leader:

“We apologized saying “we’re sorry this was cut short and that we didn’t finish like we said we would, but we will come back tomorrow”. Because of the conditions, the *event* was in second place. But people understood, it just had to be communicated.”

There is one anecdote given in an interview by a resident of Mozambique that is a particularly interesting example of how cultural differences may be a source of frustration. During relief efforts, a disagreement formed over emergency food rations that were to be

distributed in a local island community. The local government insisted that it was necessary to ship in beans and rice for distribution. However, to bring in bags of beans and rice would take an additional three days, and internationally based relief groups that were present had a shipment of high-calorie emergency biscuits already prepared to distribute. The apparently illogical insistence on taking extra time to bring in different food left the international organizers in a state of consternation. However, in Mozambique, there is an understanding that beans and rice are “real food”, that is to say, food of substance. To many Mozambicans, until there has been a meal of beans and rice, they have not truly eaten. As described by the interviewee, “they (the local government) wanted to wait another three days for beans and rice and the foreign aid guys were about ready to pull their hair out. It was not the huge things that caused problems, it was the little things.”

As shown by this example, culture can shape how we prioritize our actions and what we deem to be important. The interviewee connected the story to the idea of time and event orientations in this way:

“Event oriented people wanted the event, they wanted to take the extra time to bring in all the real food. The quality food, the stuff they are used to eating. They want the quality. The time-oriented person would rather bring in the emergency rations to meet people’s needs today, when people need it, rather than waste time.”

In many of the situations that were described throughout the interview process, culture seemed to have less of an impact than expected. The much more significant source of conflict was simply a lack of humility. One Mozambican resident described the problem this way:

“Foreigners come with the idea that they are more knowledgeable than locals, maybe 75-80% of the time to put it nicely. There is a conflict because of the locals being despised,

they may not have the knowledge or experience they need to solve a problem and they need outside help. But because they feel this condescension and that they don't have the required education, they end up using their power as local leaders to retaliate and make decisions based on their logic just for the sake of being able to make their own decisions.”

A liaison between international relief groups and a local missions and relief organization provided this criticism of the aid dynamic:

“I think aid has come to a place where it hinders more than helps when you disregard peoples' culture, their values, their traditions and the way that they function, or when you come in with a mentality of superiority. When foreigners come in with access to resources and an attitude of superiority that allows for leverage and control.”

Conclusion

We as people have culturally based predispositions for how we act, but culture influences, rather than governs, our behavior. In the end, our choices and subsequent actions very much depend on the situation. Culture is the lens that guides our understanding, but it does not take away our ability to compromise or to see through the eyes of others. In a crisis, cultural norms often take a back burner. Although cultural norms such as time versus event orientations or the typical protocol around addressing one's elders are still potential sources of frustration and misunderstanding, they do not bear as heavily as do the immediate concerns of life and the safety of one's family.

In situations where individuals from cross cultural backgrounds endeavor to work together, how can they seek to lessen the potential frustration and miscommunication? In cross-cultural interaction, the key to successful coordination is trust. Trust that builds social capital, is

based on a sense of shared purpose and commitment, familiarity, transparency, honest and open communication and, perhaps most importantly, humility. Inequality can make trust more difficult to achieve, especially in a nation where the shadow of colonialism is still a recent memory.

However, trust is not about creating equal leverage but rather negating the necessity for it.

The key to all of this is humility. Without the humility necessary to listen, consider, honor, and compromise, one runs the risk of embodying the arrogance reminiscent of the shadow of colonialism. This is a most important consideration in the world of aid and relief where there may be a distinct difference in power due to one party having access to much needed resources. As cited in examples given by interviewees, local leaders may feel they have been treated injuriously when outside groups ignore traditions of communication and respect and leverage access to needed aid in order to attain consensus with their desired course of action.

Humility entails a conscious effort to understand that things may not be as they appear to us on the surface. People's motivations may have a deeper rationale than we realize, and histories of trauma and disrespect are still very relevant today. There must be an emphasis on common ground, underlying interests, and a process of dialog and consensus building. This is difficult to achieve in a crisis, making the need for flexibility and humility all the more important. Additionally, coordinating with long-term in-country missions and relief groups and established multinational teams can be helpful, as these groups have established relationships and contextual knowledge.

In event-oriented contexts, it is often not about what you know, but who you know. Sometimes the groups that end up having the greatest impact are not the ones with the best game plan but the ones who forged relationships and came with an attitude of learning first, not teaching. When entering a new cultural context, you cannot rigidly hold to the idea that the

models you bring with you are the most effective, and that anything else is problematic. For example, rather than passing judgement on apparent “favoritism”, recognize you have entered a culture based on personal connection and that this is not inherently wrong or inefficient. We cannot simply superimpose our models and assume they are optimal. Rather, we have to recognize that our methods must be flexible. We must be open to adapting to the cultural context with curiosity, patience, and humility.

It is worth remembering that the aim of emergency relief and aid more generally should always be empowerment not dependency. In the long term, few things are more hampering to success than patterns of paternalism. Conscious choices to act out of humility, to listen, to learn, and to compromise first (rather than to speak, teach, and impose) naturally negate this dynamic.

Despite the history of ethnocentrism in aid, particularly in the case of faith-based organizations, the organization that was reported as having best embodied practices of humility and of honoring local custom was a faith-based missions and relief group. Their longstanding presence within the community, and their values of humility and honor to local leadership provided the basis for cross-cultural relationships that are productive and collaborative. This, along with love as their stated driving motivation, allows them to be perhaps more beneficial and culturally sensitive than is typical with internationally based organizations.

The idea that cultural factors play an important role as invisible barriers is a common enough refrain. But perhaps seeing culture as a barrier is a misguided view. A barrier, as some sort of impassable impediment, implies a need for it to be subverted or broken through. But when dealing with culture, it is more beneficial to understand difference as a conduit for growth, rather than grounds for conflict. To quote one final interviewee:

“It was a privilege to work alongside these amazing Mozambicans who know the language, who know the culture. We never want to act above the culture. Sure, you can help lead, but you are going to be leading with the Mozambicans, you are never going to be ahead of them. They know the culture, the traditions, they know how to go low and slow. You don’t want to go in and offend the chief or the secretary of the beira, or even kings and queens in some places. There is this whole cultural protocol that must be respected and honored. Because we live here, because we have been working with our teams, we were able to flow well. The locals that we work with, these are our brothers and sisters. People that we love and have been working with for a long, long time. Sometimes 20 years or more. We are one family, working towards one purpose, which is to help these people and to bring hope and love.”

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