

Gilbert, J. (2005) **People in Aid Newsletter**, July, 8.

Humility helps find cross-cultural solutions

Independent clinical psychologist Jane Gilbert suggests tools and techniques to value other cultures and, below, advises how to stay sensitive amid the pressures of a crisis.

Western culture is spreading its images, music, icons, food and much more ever further around the world, and it can be all too easy to assume that we all think similarly, too.

The reality is very different, as each child's socialisation ensures that different ways of making sense of the world are "in the bones" of each person. How can we value other cultures and avoid making assumptions about their point of view?

People usually assume that their own culture is "normal", and are rarely consciously aware of the assumptions they make when judging the world. For example, individuality, competitiveness, achievement, rational understanding and expressing independent opinions are not universal.

So the first task is to help staff reflect on their own culture, making explicit the values by which they judge others and their assumptions about how the world "should" be, so they can accept that people from other cultures may see the world differently and be less likely to want to impose their own values on others.

Whenever we go to "help" in another country, it is easy to forget that they know more than we do. The people with whom you are working are the experts on their own life and experiences, not the "higher status", "qualified" professional. Accepting one's own ignorance is not easy; to listen and learn, rather than rush in, requires humility and patience, and it may be useful to find a mentor or guide.

If you can listen and be seen to listen, you can create a working relationship which naturally assumes local culture and knowledge to be the predominant contribution. You can then present knowledge from your own culture tentatively, with a clear message that its relevance to local culture needs to be carefully negotiated. It is then much more likely that both parties will be able to develop a mutually beneficial relationship based on mutual respect.

As an outsider, it is up to you to creatively adapt your skills, experience and knowledge to the culture of those with whom you are working, not to try and change other people to fit your assumptions. Rather than being an instructor, it is possible to facilitate a synthesis of cultures: to validate the culture in which you are working, while offering the best from your own culture.

Accept the paradox that those who think they are going to "receive" and learn from you, will teach you more than you will teach them. And in that spirit, echo International Service's ethos: "Start with what people know, build with what they have."

Information:

Chambers, R. (2003) Whose reality counts? ITDG Publishing: London.

Sachs, J. (2003) The Dignity of Difference. Continuum: London.

Stay sensitive to tackle trauma

How can one stay culturally sensitive in the face of disaster and trauma? These principles complement the WHO guidelines on mental and social health:

- * Access to valid information is essential to reduce public anxiety and distress.
- * Avoid undermining community structures or creating dependency on external knowledge and personnel for psychological recovery.
- * Local language, expression of feelings and concepts of emotional healing must take precedence over Western interventions.
- * Appreciate cultural context. How is the disaster interpreted, how does this cultural group express distress, what are appropriate ways of healing and dealing with loss?
- * Each community has its peculiar "genius", its ways of thinking, communicating, acting, caring for its citizens. Supporting that is the basis of psychological recovery.
- * People themselves are always the experts in their own feelings. Some distress expressions may be untranslatable into Western frameworks.
- * Appropriate social interventions reviving routines can have powerful positive effects, from schooling for children to restoring cultural and religious events.
- * Re-establish family and kinship ties and social and cultural institutions, as traditions are central to people's sense of order in the universe so life provides meaning.

Extracted from a paper by Jane Gilbert, "Responding to the Psychological Aftermath of the Tsunami", available online at: <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?ID=2696> .

Information:

WHO (2003) Mental Health in Emergencies: Mental and Social Aspects of Health of Populations Exposed to Extreme Stressors.

http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/640.pdf

WHO (2005) Mental and social health during and after acute emergencies: an emerging consensus? Bulletin of the World Health Organisation, 83 (1) 71–76.

<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/83/1/en/71.pdf>

WHO (2005) Mental health assistance to those affected by the Tsunami in Asia

http://www.who.int/mental_health/resources/tsunami/en

*Both articles © Jane Gilbert 2005. Contact the author for workshops
janegilbert@janegilbert.entadsl.com +44 (0) 1768 863591.*