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# INTERCULTURAL ISSUES IN FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS - DIAGNOSIS AND SOLUTIONS

Empirical  
study

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## Keywords

organizational culture  
cultural barriers  
intercultural problems  
projects

## JEL Classification

M14

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## Abstract

*Today, collaboration, information and resource sharing with different (and sometimes even competing) organizations have been viewed as key for success building. Encouraged by the European and national institutions, formal partnerships, whether temporary or permanent, such as grant writing agreements, clusters, regional working groups or networks have become more widespread in the socio-economic environment. This paper aims to investigate the most important intercultural issues in various types of formal partnerships built in Romanian public and private organizations and to identify solutions to these problems. In order to provide a solid, research-based approach to our study, we studied the evaluation reports of programs and projects involving partnerships and conducted interviews with people involved in the development and implementation of joint activities. The application of results is straightforward: the organizations will raise their awareness of the importance of an intercultural analysis when participating in a formal partnership and will take into account the implementation of appropriate methods in order to overcome intercultural challenges.*

## 1. Introduction

Internationalization and globalization, as phenomena specific to the socioeconomic environment, cannot eliminate cultural barriers. Problems generated by diversity continue to be on the agenda of researchers who try to find ways of reconciliation [Brown L., 2009, p.249]. In this context, we are interested in analyzing intercultural barriers that could become obstacles in formal partnerships of organizations coming from different sectors, regions or countries.

The partnership is considered an element of progress in the knowledge society. Partnership is a more or less formal process, under which two or more different types of actors (from public or private sector) agree to implement an action plan, a program or through joint strategies and actions. In this paper, we focus only on formal partnership, which allows us to shape more rigorously our aim. As shown in the definition, there are many approaches to this concept. Some focus on the confluence of interests, other on the need for an organizational plan and other also on the generated dynamics [Manolescu I. T., 2005, p.263]. A partnership between different organizations is not a new idea. Over time it has evolved tremendously, being stimulated by policy makers in many ways. But there has always circulated the view that it is a hybrid concept with results below expectations, due to the nature and culture of different types of entities involved. For example, partnerships between universities and firms often took absurd forms, especially when collaboration was imposed by centralized directives, and often met mutual opposition and emphasized formalism in communism, or acid persiflage from the system connoisseurs. Partnerships are considered to be an important tool in the implementation of organizational change, considering that the added value of the

project when using the strengths of various partner organizations overcomes the difficulties inherent in managing a mix of organizational cultures, with very different goals and approaches.

In recent years, fostering cooperation between actors in the socio-economic environment has been made through grant funding programs and it has been driven by the initiative of the involved organizations. The motivation that thus appears reveals some net benefits: active engagement, needs and skills analysis, testing the compatibility of institutions carried out in advance, direct reward, but, it can also show some disadvantages: tendency to treat issues superficially, conflicts with significant negative consequences, long negotiation processes.

According to Jarniou and Tabatoni [*apud* Bosche M., 1993, p.125; Zai D., 2002, p.171], an organization is at the crossroads of three fields: normative (the field where the organization functions), organizational (the operating structure) and strategic (practices). Therefore, their contents define it, and the interaction between two organizations involves the intersection, *the clash* of the contents in each field separately. Thus, the types of intercultural problems that may occur due to differences in the mentioned fields are: axiological barriers (values, rules), barriers due to differences among structures, barriers due to differences in organizational practices.

Another classification of cultural barriers can be produced by considering the level of their origin [*adapted apud* Rozkwitalska M., 2010, p.38]:

- National culture: intercultural distance, cultural reaction, cultural hetero-stereotypes and auto-stereotypes, prejudices, national ethnocentrism;
- Organizational factors: organizational characteristics, institutional ethnocentrism, inter-organizational cultural gap;

- Individual factors: ethnocentric attitude, perception barriers, lack of international experience or a reduced experience, individual psychosocial characteristics, the low cultural knowledge and skills.

These factors can be seen as having three aspects of intercultural competence that give the person and from the person also to the organization, the ability to operate effectively in conditions of cultural diversity: cognitive, affective and behavioural [Lloyd S., Härtel Ch., 2010, pp. 846-852, Bird A. *et al*, 2010, p. 811].

Structuring major parts that define the intercultural situation in formal partnerships offer an overview of the areas that can induce cultural problems, in order to anticipate and prevent them (see fig. no. 1).

The figure above shows that there are various issues which can cause blockings in the relations in multicultural teams, networks, groups, different organizations.

## 2. Research design

The paper aims to highlight the intercultural foundation of formal partnerships between different economic and social actors, the difficulties in formation and operation of such partnerships and to provide possible solutions to overcome intercultural barriers.

The main hypothesis is that there are important barriers to achieving and implementing formal partnerships between different organizations.

The reference model used was TREND (Transformed Relationships Evolved from Network Data), which involves the use of cultural differences in the organization [Meredith J., Mantel S., 1995], which target potential problems arising from the interaction between different groups. The model is based on three key concepts: interdependence, uncertainty and prestige. Problems tend to arise when a group/person with high status depends on another group/person with

lower status within the organization, and the stages of the project with a low level of uncertainty follow a deeply uncertain path. In our research, we have expanded this model by introducing more cultural dimensions and by highlighting specific issues that arise when there are discrepancies between organizations. The main steps of our research are shown in Figure 2.

The main research methods used are:

- documenting conditions for achieving formal partnerships;
- studying analysis reports of running projects that involve collaboration between different organizations (public and private enterprises, NGOs, educational and research institutions);
- privileged type interviews with the 8 promoters or other participants in partnership type projects.

Documentation looked at description of various organizations' involvement in formal partnerships and highlighted key-cultural parameters. Studying analysis reports resulted in a detailed understanding of the fundamental nature of projects and collection of the number and range of problems in these projects. In the privileged interviews we aimed to validate cultural dimensions identified in the documentation stage and to highlight of specific problems and conclusions from running partnerships experience.

In this paper, we give an inventory of issues related to cultural barriers/disparities; future research will pursue a three-dimensional diagnosis model of intercultural issues in formal partnerships.

## 3. Current State of Knowledge

### 3. 1. Barriers due to national culture differences

#### 3. 1. 1. Intercultural communication barriers

Lack of intercultural communication skills, which refers to those skills that facilitate communication

and lead to success in terms of outcomes and satisfaction, and to other positive evaluations from the intercultural interaction [Y.Y. Kim *apud* Jandt F., 2007, p.4] represents one of the sources that lead to frequent misunderstandings. We consider both verbal (linguistic and discursive differences) and body language.

Language, as the main way of encoding the messages flowing between the transmitter and the receiver is very important [Chitakornkijasil P., 2010, p.8]. In international partnerships, the use of English has become frequent. However, there is still a complex set of problems that arise. Given that communication occurs between natives and non-natives or between non-natives, the process of decoding has difficulties due to idiomatic differences, but also, due to the nature or non-verbal context that can change the meaning. The seemingly trivial terms such as performance or intelligence, people from different cultures understand them differently [Triandis H., 2006].

Thus, not understanding the language of the partner or verbal communication limited by lack of more advanced language skills in a common language, improper understanding of the intention behind the language or discourse, double dimension of the speech act (explicit and implicit, the latter being coded culturally) are issues that arise in intercultural communication [Bonta E., 2006, Neculescu, A. N., 2010]. These communication barriers impact the attitude towards diversity and cultural sensitivity [Moghaddam J. M. *et al.*, 2011, p 53].

### 3. 1. 2. *Barriers due to differences from the axiological point of view*

Differences between national cultures that influence mostly individuals are another source of intercultural problems. Each national cultural space can be described by a set of *conditions* [Bordieu P., 2012], *patterns* [Parsons T., 2005], *cultural orientations* [Kluckhohn and Stroedback *apud* Hills M. D. , 2002] *cultural dimensions* [Hofstede G., 1996,

2012, Hampden-Turner Ch. and Trompenaars F., 2004] that make individuals think, feel, behave in a specific manner. By referring always to their own values, their own grid of decoding encouraging solutions offered by their culture, individuals merely align in a way to what was unconsciously structured deep down in their cultural given, especially in the first years of life. Even the awareness of this type of determinism is hard to achieve. Integrating other components from other cultural spaces and alternating possible solutions to these problems but it requires strong will, openness and effort.

### 3. 2. **Barriers due to organizational factors**

#### 3. 2. 1. *Barriers due to differences in values and rules*

In addition to differences between national cultures of individuals interacting in intercultural partnerships appear differences between values and rules of organizational cultures. The latter guides the behaviour of individuals and influences the vision of ethical issues related even to the relationships with partners. Incompatibilities cause problems.

#### 3. 2. 2. *Barriers due to differences in organizational structures*

Differences between organizational structures create other barriers that generate misunderstandings. Cultural dimensions, power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions of national culture have an impact on preferred structures in different countries. Possible positioning include [Hofstede G., 1996, Hofstede G. *et al.*, 2012]:

- pyramid-people (in countries characterized by high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance);
- well-oiled machine (in countries characterized by low power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance);
- village market (in countries characterized by low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance);

- family model (in countries characterized by high power distance and low uncertainty avoidance).

Obviously, depending on the area of activity, the company size and other criteria of adequacy, companies choose one structure or another. During their interaction, there may occur misunderstandings, problems of inadequacy and mutual misfit. For example, an employee, used to work in a structure where not the hierarchy, but the requirements of the situation decide what will happen, could not be able to understand operation based on concentration of authority.

### 3. 2. 3. *Barriers due to differences between practices*

Different scaling dimensions of organizational culture, criteria of comparison, which can be the basis of an inter-organizational cultural diagnosis, were used to analyse differences in organizational culture. Further, we refer to Geert Hofstede's model applied to this research, noting that it refers to practices. In his view, the following dimensions reflect the differences among them [Hofstede G. *et al.*, 2012, pp.340-344]:

- orientation towards process - focus on results (reflecting the concern for the means, in the first case, and, for the aims, in the second case; strong cultures, characterized by homogeneity are oriented towards results);
- orientation towards employees - orientation towards work (meaning the concern for the employees' personal problems at the expense of task orientation or vice versa);
- local - professional (sees in opposition the origin of identity of individuals: organization, in the first case, occupation, profession, in the second case);
- open system - closed system (reflecting the degree of openness shown towards outsiders and newcomers);
- free control - strict control (measures the degree of internal structuring of an organization, attention given to costs and

unwritten strict codes - punctuality in attending meetings, dress codes, behaviour, etc

- normative - pragmatic (indicates the orientation towards applying rules considered unchangeable against opening towards customer requirements, in the first case, and vice versa, in the second case).

Organizational practices are influenced by national cultural values, from where derives the importance of an intercultural complex analysis, taking into account the relationship between the national culture-and the organizational culture.

Problems can occur, however, even in the same country. Partnerships between public and private sectors, for example, involve crossing of different organizational environments, generating tense situations and misunderstandings.

### 3. 3. **Barriers due to individual factors**

Starting from this perspective based on factors of individual nature, we could classify cultural barriers as follows: [Gauthey F., Xardel D., 1990, p.42, Lloyd S., Härtel Ch., 2010, pp.846-852]:

- *cognitive level*: lack of knowledge about their own culture, lack of awareness of the implications of culture, lack of knowledge of other style/styles of problem solving specific to other culture/cultures, not being aware/not accepting cultural relativism;
- *emotional level*: fear of what is foreign, unfamiliar; difficulty to get out of their own reference point; stereotypes and prejudices; judgments of value: ethnocentrism, not accepting differences;
- *behavioural level*: lack of intercultural communication skills, lack of emotions and conflict management skills.

We should also mention problems that arise because the individual belongs simultaneously to several levels of culture, being integrated at the same time into multiple groups. There thus arises, even within the same culture, a huge diversity in terms of ideas, perceptions, conceptions, attitudes, stemming from many possible combinations of other culturally dependent

variables (education, type of education, occupation, ethnicity, religion, sex, age, etc.), having an influence on an individual.

### 3. 4. Other cultural barriers

#### 3. 4. 1. *Ethnocentrism*

Ethnocentrism is defined as a state of mind that favours the group of belonging, being considered the only reference model [Zai D., 2002, p.63]. This state of mind is characterizing naturally the human being, which is why it is difficult to overcome [Triandis H., 2006, p.22].

Understanding is possible only by proper linking cultural events to circumstances that led to the appearance of these events, but most of the time there is no interest in doing this, and the value judgments become barriers between those inside and outside the group. Ethnocentrism may take the form of isolated individual events, may occur at the group, organizational levels, or be a generalized attitude at the regional / country level. Sometimes, it can degenerate into severe nationalism and xenophobia.

#### 3. 4. 2. *Cultural shock*

Cultural shock, defined as an *intercultural counterbalance between an individual and a totally new cultural environment*, [Hofstede, *apud* Stanciu S., Ionescu M. A., 2005, p.108] is felt by all people facing an unfamiliar environment. It can lead to anxiety, tension and insecurity, with a strong influence on professional efficiency and productivity. It can be manifested both as leaving the country and coming back.

#### 3. 4. 3. *Stereotypes and prejudices*

Stereotypes and prejudices, as images in our mind, can be positive or negative. Usually, auto-stereotypes have positive and favourable character and hetero-stereotypes tend to depreciate groups to which they refer. The area of occurrence varies. We can talk about national stereotypes, ethnic, racial, religious, gender, etc. The distortion and

generalization lead to new barriers and intercultural problems [Zai D., 2002]. The difference between stereotypes and prejudices is that stereotypes can have a purely cognitive role, while prejudices have necessarily emotional involvement. If this involvement reveals a negative attitude towards employees, this leads to poor communication and cooperation.

#### 3. 4. 4. *Discrimination*

Discrimination, defined as *any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, nationality, language, religion, social status, belief, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, contagious chronic disease, AIDS infection or belonging to a disadvantaged group, which has the purpose or effect of restricting or removing the recognition, use or exercise, on an equal condition of human rights and fundamental freedoms or the rights recognized by law, in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life* [Law no.27/2004], is another problem that can occur during cooperation. Negative effects result from unequal treatment.

### 4. Research results and interpretation

Analyzed organizations participating in formal partnerships are characterized by:

- the existence of common features (organizations with similar elements of organizational culture, deriving mainly from national culture);
- the existence of different elements (organizational structure, project integration, willingness to invest in staff training, staff organization support, orientation towards innovation, orientation towards extensive rules, hierarchical distance, risk taking).

The main characteristics of the studied organizations that have an impact on the partnership approach are shown in table 1.

Problems and outcomes originating from cultural barriers identified by the

research were divided into 5 levels, previously outlined in Figure no.1.

#### 4.1. National level

- There are cultures in which organizational and private life are separate; after working hours, employees no longer fulfill their duties - the term *urgent* is not so urgent to them; in other cultures, employees continue to work after hours and emergencies are solved from home - emergencies require immediate solution;

Effect: these different perceptions generate tension, stress, disagreements, complaints.

- Different understanding of human relationships and roles deriving from them: some partners, following unwritten rules, need to take care of those who come from other countries at meetings, assessing and organizing informal meetings; other partners limit themselves to formal meetings, narrowing them to the professional sphere; some partners follow a strict agenda, others use as guidelines; some expect the meetings to come to a decision, others expect decisions to be taken in advance, meetings having only a formal character;

Effect: different expectations and misinterpretation of partner behaviour often creates tensions and negative attitudes.

- The environment of project team is characterized as optimal when it is based on less formal relations, direct and sincere; communication within multinational groups, in countries with high power distance, suffers from this point of view; the expert nominations maybe based on their position and not on technical expertise;

Effect: negative attitudes, suspicions and direct accusations, stress, misunderstandings, failures in getting results.

#### 4.2. National / organizational level

- National agencies that manage European funds through various projects introduce additional requirements leading to a degree even greater of bureaucratization; for example, there are countries where

documents are only valid with signature, no stamps are required, therefore partners in these countries send documents according to practices on their countries and agencies require to resubmit documents;

Effect: emergence of tensions between partners who do not understand why lack of trust and lack of respect for their time are; many omissions leading to delays;

- The difference between the usual level of "centralization" for academic coordinators, for example (who enjoy pretty much decision-making power) and the highly centralized and bureaucratized level imposed by the European projects;

Effect: the emergence of a sense of hopelessness in work, overload, restrictions.

#### 4.3. Organizational level

- Items related to *image*: even having real advantages as a partner, some organizations are considered elitist, inaccessible with cumbersome mechanisms of decision and action; the existence of an internal system of projects/ partnerships evaluation and selection; organizational elements: busy schedule of decision-makers, sending proposals from one department to another, too narrowly-oriented departments; need for multiple approvals and long waiting times;

Effect: inhibitory for certain partnership proposals from other organizations.

#### 4.4. Organizational / personal level

- Differences in experience and training areas lead to conflicting visions and requirements from project evaluators; other differences involve partners or expert reasons: for some, the major target is the technical implementation of the project, while for others, it is the contribution made to objectives of their organization;

Effect: different prioritization for objectives and activities; document have to be remade; increased wasting of material and financial resources, time is lost, lack of motivation.

- Differences in terms of motivation and purpose, dependent on values, lead to

privileging different aspects (some focus on the financial side, others on the relationship, others want to exploit the cognitive side, and are motivated by new experiences, etc.);

Effect: *fight* for prioritizing issues pursued by each party.

- Emergence of an axiological gap between teams or even within the same team by prioritizing different values, depending on professionals and organizational culture; for example, staff with technical background was hired within agencies to deal with economic, legal or educational issues, etc., also, project managers come from different levels of training; moreover, differences in organizational values, structures and practices increase this gap;

Effect: competition for imposing their own point of view, support their interests.

#### 4.5. Personal level

- Often in projects, participants take new roles, for which they are not ready; this functional mobility can have a negative impact; hence, the need for building quality teams, with a balanced set of skills, mobile according to their expertise;

Effect: tasks performed poorly, delays, need to remake documents.

- Assigning a different, more prominent roles within teams - each has a tendency to overestimate the importance of their tasks and consider that partners' tasks were carried out better by them, due to a natural ethnocentric attitudes;

Effect: direct or indirect criticism, showing an attitude of superiority, etc.

- Items related to interpersonal communication: elitist approach from staff organizations, narrow vocational orientation, short discussions due to busy schedule.

Effect: inhibitory for certain partnership proposals from other organizations.

## 5. Conclusions

To overcome the intercultural problems, it is recommended [Chitakornkijasil P., 2010, p 18]:

- to develop methods/practices/common procedures that can govern the activities of the parties involved without causing cultural prejudices;

- to consider the effects of decisions on partners;

- to foster good communication, mutual information, timely, joint decision-making;

- to create and maintain flow of ideas and data in external and internal environment.

Overcoming cultural barriers is possible with training and cultural contact. Understanding the need to reconcile differences, dialectical attitudes are predisposing factors in intercultural learning. Quality teams, complementary skills and proper allocation of roles are other issues that lead to developing successful partnerships in an intercultural context.

The table overviews several types of formal partnerships and their impact on the project and future collaborations (Table 2).

Negative consequences of intercultural barriers that have an impact on partnerships are the following:

- refusal to take part in similar consortia, reducing the chances of gaining financing, due to lack of key components;

- forced solutions to achieve cooperation - often reduced only at the stage of documentation and sharing of materials benefits derived from projects;

- use of *informal partnerships*; while partner organizations have undeniable strengths, it is preferred to work outside the formal partnership, just through some people employed by organizations;

- recourse to mutual understanding - the developer carried on their own activities without consulting the partners in exchange for material or immaterial benefits of the project;

- loss of credibility in front of foreign partners;

- reduced collaboration, hostile and stressful work environment;



- tensions between subordinates and management, delays in activities, low performance.

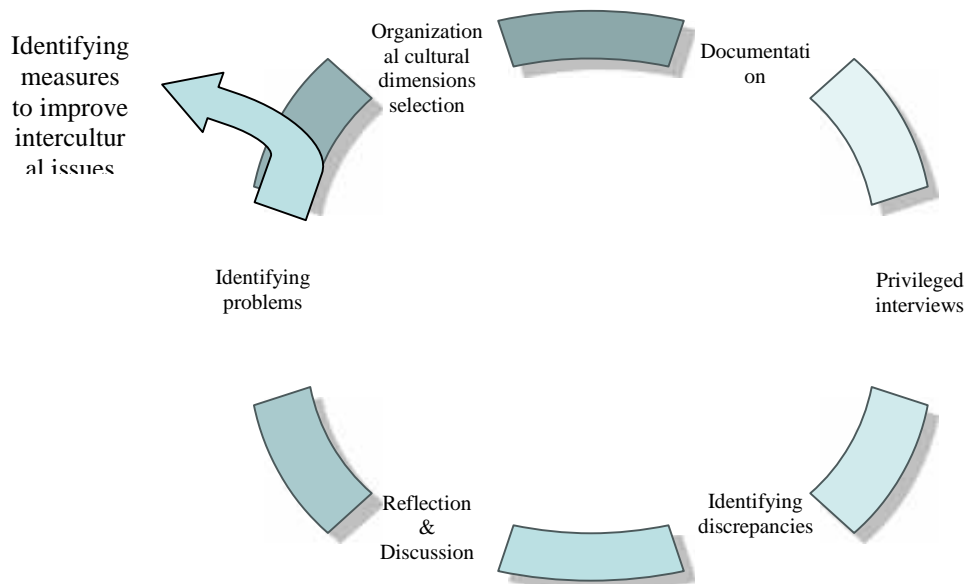
Even if, there are some difficulties in carrying out activities, the impact of partnerships and their sustainability over time has been reflected in the successful implementation of projects. In order to achieve lasting results, sustained support is needed in different areas and human resources development should become a priority.

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**Fig. no. 1. Components defining the intercultural situation**



**Fig. no. 2. Main research steps**

**Table 1. Differentiating elements of partner organizations**

Feature	Universities	SMEs	NGOs	Research and educational organizations	Public administration institutions
Structure of project integration	Matrix-type, balanced	Functional	Project based	Matrix-type, strong (oriented towards projects)	Functional
Willingness to invest in staff training	High	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Stakes of the project for organizational development	Medium	High	High	High	Medium
Stakes of the project for professional recognition	High	Low	Medium	High	High
Stakes of the project for establishing material rewards	Medium	Medium	High	High	Low
Support offered by the organization to staff	Strong	Weak	Medium	Strong	Medium
Orientation towards innovation	Strong	Medium	Strong	Strong	Low
Orientation towards expanded rules	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Strong
Hierarchical distance	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Strong
Risk taking	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Low

Adapted from: Manolescu, I.T., Prodan, A., (2006), *Particularities of conflicts management in projects, in International Business Economy, Research Paper Series, No. 7. Special Issue The third international conference "International business in transition economies"*, Aalborg University, Denmark, p.532.

**Table 2. Types of formal partnerships and their impact**

Typical partnership structure	Context	Results for project	Results for future collaboration
Superficial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the developer believes it <i>looks good</i> to have some collaborators</li> <li>the partnership is imposed by management authority</li> </ul>	none	reduced or even disastrous
East – west type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It requires the expertise of specialists</li> <li>Major projects, like a system change or operationalization</li> </ul>	effective	miscellaneous
Networked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>for complex projects</li> <li>in organizations with a large number of people located in different geographical areas and organized in different hierarchical structures</li> </ul>	excellent	excellent, <i>win / win</i> relationship
By collaborator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It requires the expertise of specialists</li> <li>Partnership is considered a technical criteria</li> </ul>	good	reduced