TU Delft Intercultural Relations and Project Management

Cultural Factors affecting Sanitation in sub-Saharan Africa

Shannon Gross *4735048*

A R T I C L E I N F O

This article is written as an assingment for the course: Intercultural Relations and Project Management, TU Delft

26 January '18

Course managers:
Dr.Ir B. Enserink

1,952 words

Keywords:
sanitation
Hofstede
culture
sub-Saharan Africa
humanitarian

A B S T R A C T

Enormous amounts of resources are spent by humanitarian organizations each year in an attempt to improve sanitation conditions in the developing world. Despite decades of efforts by western aid workers to intervene in sub-Saharan Africa, the results of these investments are lacking. This paper introduces cultural factors as an under-studied dimension of why international aid projects may produce lackluster results and asks the question: how do cultural differences between Sub-Saharan communities and western engineers affect humanitarian aid projects designed to improve sanitation conditions? The following article applies quantitative scoring methods developed by cultural theorist Geert Hofstede to understand social factors relevant for project managers working in this region. The report presents three cultural considerations that engineering teams should consider incorporating in order to make the implementation of sanitation development projects in sub-Saharan Africa more successful in the future.

I. Introduction

In 2013, the European Court of Auditors reviewed €1 billion worth of EU humanitarian projects from the preceding decade that were designed to improve sanitation access in sub-Saharan Africa. The Court of Auditors found "serious flaws," "culpable waste," and stated that the majority of the projects were complete failures [1]. The auditors emphasized the millions of deaths occurring each year in the region due to poor sanitation and suggested that the EU drastically increase the level of local engagement in future projects to make them more effective [1]. Similarly, critics of western-led projects have claimed that that interventions focused primarily on technical and financial considerations, while neglecting important social and cultural issues [2][3]. The result has been the failure of indigenous communities to use modern sanitation projects, to the bafflement of donor countries. Subsequently, humanitarian organizations have called for a greater understanding of the role played by cultural considerations on project success.

This article addresses the question: *how do cultural differences between Sub-Saharan communities and western engineers affect sanitation development projects?* The goal of this paper is to understand why differences between donor and beneficiary cultures may influence the success or failure of projects designed to improve health conditions in the developing world. Specifically, this analysis aims to give western engineers some insight into sub-Saharan African perspectives of humanitarian interventions using literature studies. In the following sections, three cultural considerations about sub-Saharan culture are presented as well as their implications for western engineers. Chapter 2 explains the cultural framework by psychologist Geert Hofstede used in this analysis and Section 3 provides a discussion of the results. Finally, a conclusion section is presented at the end in the form of guidance for practice.

II. Methods

According to the pioneering cultural theorist Geert Hofstede, very little money has been spent on studying the

mutual relationship between culture and technological change, although anthropologists for decades have shown culture's crucial impact on the results of international development projects [3]. In his book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, he uses the now-classic example of a western engineering firm that installs a technologically complex yet easy-to-operate irrigation system in an African country [3, Ch. 11, pp. 418]. A few months after the firm's departure, the system breaks down and is never repaired. The daily practices of the local community conflicted with the technology, thus it was never used [3]. In Hofstede's words, intercultural encounters in the context of development cooperation are more productive if "there is a two-way flow of know-how: technical know-how from the donor to the receiver, and cultural know-how about the context in which the technical know-how should be applied, from the receiver to the donor" [3].

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was chosen for this analysis because more than 70% of the population does not have access to an improved sanitation facility[1] [4]. Importantly, it must be acknowledged that the categorization "sub-Saharan Africa" is artificial and dynamic. No single classification can totally capture the many countries, tribes, religions and languages that make up the region. However, it can be said that the shared history of this region is sufficiently similar (and sufficiently distinct from what is commonly considered "the west") as to warrant aggregated comparison.

The two regions are compared using six "cultural dimensions" developed by Hofstede, which score countries based on questionnaire responses. For brevity, this report only describes the three dimensions that show the most significant differences between the regions. For a full description of each dimension, the reader is referred to [3]. The dimensions of significance in this context are: (1) Individualism versus Collectivism; (2) Power Distance; and (3) Masculinity versus Femininity. These dimensions are described in the following sections along with their scoring results from Hofstede.

III. Results

Regionally-aggregated scores from Hofstede are given in Figure 1. Overall, SSA [2] societies score as highly collectivist with large power distance. Such nations typically nurture family relationships, feel loyalty to organizations, are highly assertive, have strong gender stereotypes, and do not expect power to be distributed evenly [5]. In contrast, western cultures score high on individualism and low on power distance. In other words, westerners value equal rights, team participation, and direct communication [3]. According to Lituchy [5], these broad cultural differences between SSA and westerners influence how a leader is supposed to act in certain situations as well as the decision-making power they have available.

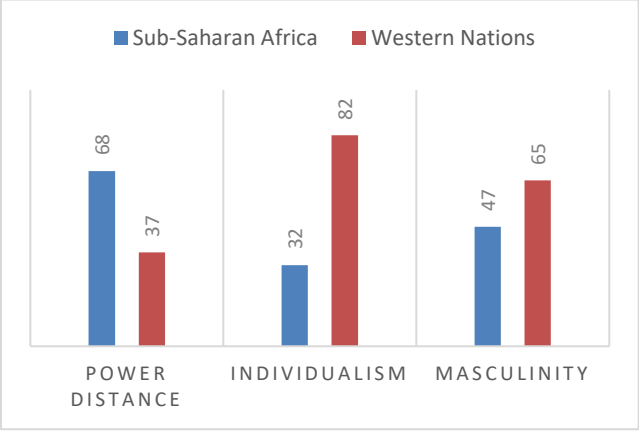

Figure 1 Composite scores of sub-Saharan Africa and western countries. Data obtained from the website *Hofstede Insights* [6].

Collectivism versus Individualism

Sub-Saharan Africa is a highly collectivist society, with great emphasis on group consensus. According to Schwartz [7], this is an "embedded culture" where people identify themselves collectively through their social relationships, rather than viewing themselves foremost as individuals. This view can best be described by the African term *ubuntu*, meaning "I am what I am because of who we all are" [5]. Individualistic actions are "associated with a lack of caring and generosity because people are perceived to be alienated from their traditions, culture, and each other" [8]. Because individualism is not encouraged, western engineers may struggle to adapt. Behaviours that are seen as individualistic or non-*ubuntu* may be shunned. Studies by Swartz [8] and Karan [9] describe firms being frustrated after providing new sanitation infrastructure but failing to change community behaviour even after discussing the dangers of unhygienic practices. Another study by McDonald [10] found that collectivist perceptions impacted the ability of the engineer to communicate effectively, because villagers were reluctant to give opinions that were not representative of the whole group or

[1] About 695 million people

[2] For this study, the GLOBE [12] sub-Saharan Africa cluster of the following countries is used: Nambia, Zambia, Zibmabwe, Nigeria, and South Africa (non-white sample).

it was not their place to comment, even though their opinions may have helped the engineer design better systems [9].

A stronger reason for getting locals to adopt sanitation methods may be to convince them that it is needed to "belong" with the rest of the group. For example, Novotny [2] found that factors such as prestige, security, comfort, privacy, and a desire to appear modern may be stronger drivers of behaviour change that education alone. Therefore, a new strategy known as the Community-Led Total Sanitation approach focuses on social and emotional factors[3]. It uses techniques to "heighten the perceived benefits of latrine use, provoke emotions such as disgust, shame and fear of illness to create a sense of peer pressure, and change norms to see open defecation as socially unacceptable" [2]. This approach was praised by the EU Court of Auditors for its success in changing behaviour in Nigerian villages [1].

Power Distance Index

Sub-Saharan Africa scores high on Hofstede's Power Distance Index (PDI). According to Hofstede, subordinates in such cultures are used to being instructed on what to do by their bosses and may be uncomfortable with more democratic working styles commonplace in western cultures [3; pp. 73-74]. In the west, low-PDI scores highlight a preference for a consultative leader who shares power. However, Africans prefer to follow established rules that conform with their values, feeling that failure to follow will bring punishment either by their superiors or deities [10]. Therefore, a project involving an African workforce will more likely be improved if rules and associated disciplinary actions are well defined [10]. This may be counterintuitive to westerners, who would like to involve common community members on an equal basis.

To compound the situation, a distinctive feature of SSA culture is the tendency to have a "Big Man" which is considered an all-powerful, fearsome, omniscient leader [5]. Therefore, locals have great "deference to rank" [10] such that they place importance on people taking their proper place in the situation's social hierarchy. This idea was emphasized in [9], describing the autocratic tendencies of African leaders to have both reinforced this behaviour as well as pushed individuals to be cautious about expressing disagreement with authorities. Furthermore, because of their upbringing to be courteous and show deference, it is "even more difficult to be blunt when necessary" [9]. Hofstede [3, Ch. 11, pp. 418] discusses the paradox of involving all participants when a culture has a high PDI score.

The "Big Man" structure is typically such that decision-makers are male and elderly. Accordingly, there are significant hurdles for westerners who would like to design strategies that meet the needs of the entire village, not just the chief and elders. Since water collection is typically performed by women and children who have different sanitation needs, westerners are inclined to involve them in the design process [10]. However, westerners may not realize that instead of asking community members for their advice they would be more effective to work within local power structures [10]. Lack of understanding about the community may lead engineers to approach projects with management styles that are ineffective to successful implementation and use.

Even within individual families, the influences of high power distance are visible. In Uganda, for example, having great respect for elderly in-laws meant that some members of the household were not comfortable sharing a latrine [11]. When a western firm interviewed why villagers continued to practice open defecation even after latrines were constructed, a common answer was a "lack of privacy" [11]. The community had strong local taboos against being seen or perceived to "do one's business" and therefore by walking to a field one could be assumed to do some other task, such as collect firewood [11]. The engineers were baffled to learn that because latrines had been built in the centre of the village, people were ashamed of using them because elders might see them entering or leaving the facilities [11].

Masculinity

The masculinity (MAS) dimension looks at what extent a culture accepts traditional gender roles. The high SSA score for MAS suggests that people from this region tend to be assertive, and are driven by competition, achievement, and success [3]. The role of African women in the community may be clearly different than what western engineers are accustomed to. Because females are often perceived as inferior, they are generally not included in important aspects of decision making. Therefore, a western engineering project run by a woman could face discrimination and be seen as weak or incapable of making important decisions [3].

In the high-MAS cultures of Africa, women are more likely to lack support in teaching children good habits, monitoring their behaviours, and maintaining clean houses, as men are not required to do household chores in the gender-stereotyped culture [9]. If husbands played more active roles toward care of children and household cleanliness, several pathways of unhygienic behaviours could be avoided [9]. However, the future success of sanitation projects calls for a deeper understanding of the way in which culture, development, and hygienic

[3] see www.communityledtotalsanitation.org

behaviours interact with one another [9]. Western programs intended to change sanitation behaviour, therefore, must not ignore existing gender divides in the community structure even though such imbalances may conflict with what the engineering team is used to.

IV. Conclusion

This report reviewed the implications of cultural differences between western humanitarian workers and aid recipients in sub-Saharan Africa. The differences in power distance between the two cultures indicate that there is much more that sanitation engineers must do than install latrines and depart. Without considering community and family power structures, the infrastructure may work fine but never be used. Additionally, if westerners are to be successful in reaching the community, they must not try and change local power and gender imbalances to resemble their own cultures. Rather, research shows that it is more effective to work *within* local norms. Similarly, western engineers may need to adjust their messages for promotion of improved sanitation to fit local customs. Importantly, this paper does not produce an exhaustive list of cultural factors for humanitarian work; rather, it provides a starting point for project managers to consider when designing their own programs in the future.

LIST OF REFERENCES

[1] House of Lords. *European Court of Auditors Special Report: Development Assistance for Drinking Water Supply and Basic Sanitation in Sub-Saharan African Countries*. [Letter written July 29, 2013 to Commissioner Andris Piebalgs]. Available: http://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/eu-sub-com-c/EU%20WASH/130729LordBoswell-CommissionerPiebalgsWASH.pdf

[2] J. Novotný, J. Kolomazníková, H, Humňalová. "The Role of Perceived Social Norms in Rural Sanitation: An Explorative Study from Infrastructure-Restricted Settings of South Ethiopia." *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2017*, vol. 14, pp. 794.

[3] G. Hofstede, G.J. Hofstede, and M. Minkov, "Intercultural Encounters," in *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind: intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival*, 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010, ch. 11, sec. IV, pp. 412–420.

[4] WHO and UNICEF. "Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene," *2017 Update and SDG Baselines*. Geneva: World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2017. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. Available: http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2017/launch-version-report-jmp-water-sanitation-hygiene.pdf

[5] T.R., Lituchy, B.L. Galperin, and B.J. Punnett, "A Cultural Perspective of Africa," in *LEAD: leadership effectiveness in Africa and the African diaspora*. New York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, ch. 2, pp.19-31.

[6] Hofstede Insights. "What About South Africa?" in *Country Comparison*. Hofstede Insights, 2018. [Online]. Available: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/south-africa/

[7] Schwartz, S. H. "A Theory of Cultural Value Orientations: Explication and Applications," *Comparative Sociology*, vol. 5, no. 2-3, pp. 137-179, Sep. 2006.

[8] E. Swartz and R. Davies, "Ubuntu - The spirit of African transformation management - A review," *Leadership & Organization Development Journal,* vol 18, issue 6, pp. 290-294, Nov. 1997.

[9] A. Karan, G.B. Chapman, and A. Galvani, "The Influence of Poverty and Culture on the Transmission of Parasitic Infections in Rural Nicaraguan Villages," Journal of Parasitology Research, vol. 2012, Article ID 478292, 12 pages, 2012. doi:10.1155/2012/478292.

[10] P. McDonald and L. Maloiy, "Postcolonial African Political Leadership: Triump and Tragedy," in *International Journal of Economic and Political Integration*, S. Sarkar, Universal-Publishers, vol. 5, no.1-2, 2016, pp. 50-51.

[11] Thys et al., "Why Latrines Are Not Used: Communities' Perceptions and Practices Regarding Latrines in a *Taenia solium* Endemic Rural Area in Eastern Zambia," *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases*, 2015, *9*(3), e0003570, 2015. Available: http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0003570.

[12] GLOBE Foundation. (2016). "Sub-Saharan Africa," *Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe,* [Online]. Available: http://globeproject.com/results/clusters/sub-saharan-africa?menu=list