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Title	The value of inter-cultural intelligence: An Interview with Mirna Angela Cuentas	
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APA citation	Botha, L. with Lumerman, P. (2015). The value of inter-cultural intelligence: An Interview with Mirna Angela Cuentas. Reflections from Practice Series No.9 (B. Ganson, ed.). The Hague: ACCESS Facility. Retrieved from Scholar.SUN.ac.za	
Year	2015	
Peer reviewed?	No	
Document type 1	Interview	
Document type 2	N/A	
Key topic 1	Dispute resolution	
Key topic 2	Business and human rights	
Key topic 3	Business, conflict, and development	
Key lens 1	Third party roles	
Key lens 2	N/A	
Visible to public?	Yes	
Notes	This is no. 9 of 15 in a series of Reflections from Practice that ACDS produced for ACCESS Facility. The series shares insights on company-community dialogue and rights-compatible, interest-based conflict resolution from senior practitioners.	



THE VALUE OF INTER-CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE An Interview with Mirna Angela Cuentas

Linda Botha with Pablo Lumerman

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Mirna Angela Cuentas is an expert facilitator of State-Business-Community dialogues. She has recently been involved with the Conflict Transformation Collaborative (CTC). She has worked for many years with indigenous communities on agricultural issues, including land rights.

Question: What is one of the more significant issues you encounter when you are facilitating company-community dialogue?

Answer: Getting parties to fully appreciate the importance of inter-cultural dimensions of dialogue.

If you work with indigenous communities, governments and corporations, you need in-depth knowledge of each one of these groups. There is a very big difference between the worldview of indigenous communities and the worldview of a company or government representative. When we hear the word “culture” we usually think it refers to indigenous or rural people, since they have a more traditional way of life. But in my work, “culture” is relevant to all parties. Even a private company has a culture - a certain way of doing things and of seeing the world. So if you are facilitating a dialogue among these groups, you need to understand all the different perspectives people bring to the table.

The problem is that the diverse cultures of indigenous communities are not generally understood. The worldview and norms of the corporate and government “way of doing things” are better known. Government or company representatives often have no idea what life looks like from the point of view of indigenous people. Companies arrive in a area with a new idea for a project, often with good intentions to help the local community. But they don’t ask people what they need. They don’t try to get a better understanding of the local context and customs. They want to get things done quickly. They go build a school or a market, but this might not be what the local people really need. It may not be relevant to how the new project is going to affect their daily lives.

Question: *What is an example of this challenge?*

Answer: *Neglect of cultural aspects in a dispute that is raging between the government and people in Bolivia.*

This conflict occurred around TIPNIS (Isiboro Séure National Park and Indigenous Territory), which is home to more than 12,000 villagers living in this indigenous territory. Some years ago, the government decided to build a big road through the area. This project was led by Brazil as part of an initiative to link the area to the Trans-Amazonian highway. This also implied links to other regional developments, like hydroelectric dams and power systems.

The park’s ecosystem is threatened by this project. The new road also has the potential to open up vast areas of forest to illegal logging and human settlement. The interesting thing here is that the indigenous people were not in principle opposed to this road. But they had a problem with the exact location of it. Not once did the government pause for a moment to ask them: *“Where would be the best place to build this road through your country?”* No thought given to how the road might affect the way of life of these people.

The conflict was ignited due to lack of knowledge. Government had no idea about the meaning of ancestral land for the indigenous communities and the importance of territorial spaces to them. Even though the area is vast, indigenous people use it for hunting, fishing, harvesting, and so on. There was no consultation and dialogue before the project. The government representatives only wanted to build the road and to get it done fast.

Question: *How did this impact the parties’ ability to achieve rights-compatible, interest-based outcomes?*

Answer: Violent clashes erupted and tensions remain.

In 2011, many indigenous protestors embarked on two marches to the capital, La Paz, to ensure that the authorities recognized their grievances. Government wanted to stop this march from happening, but people kept walking for months. Eventually government forces met them with violence and aggression. There were scores of injuries and even women and children were affected. It was a complete violation of human rights. Many people were upset with the way government acted. Nobody could understand how such a thing could happen in a country where the president himself was of indigenous origin.

This is an area where facilitators must do more to educate the parties on the cultural differences that can have a big impact on how negotiations unfold. In many cases it helps to humanise the other side in order to stimulate some mutual empathy. Company and government representatives especially need to experience first hand what the lives of indigenous communities are like. They need to walk around in the villages, in the streets, and share a meal with the people. They need to go see the sacred places and territorial areas that matter to these cultures. This is the only way you can really build trust. It is not about convincing the other party about anything in particular, it is about finding the best way to work together.

Question: The answer to what question would have helped you be able to more effectively intervene as a third party?

Answer: What is the best way to generate mutual understanding and empathy between parties?

These kinds of disputes require cultural intelligence. If we talk about the importance of inter-cultural dimensions of negotiations, the TIPNIS situation is an example of “how not to do it.” It highlights the asymmetrical relationships that are often present during these conflicts. For example, our constitution recognises *indigenous* peoples, but also other groups like *originales* and *campesinos*. Each has very different conceptions of land use and ownership. Not everyone in and around TIPNIS thinks in the same way. In this line of work you have to make sense of the customs and cultures of different parties. You have to be a cultural translator, deciphering the messages and codes so that parties can start to understand each other.

You have to find a way to break through the rigidity you sometimes find between opposing positions. Sometimes companies can be very inflexible if they are only thinking about profit. This makes it difficult to get them to walk in the shoes of another person. The same can be true of government

officials. Some of them used to be part of indigenous communities before they became public officials. Groups that previously had no power, and now suddenly have lots of power, can be quite rigid, afraid to give anything up.

You can't do this type of work if you rush in with a PowerPoint presentation or a document written by an engineer that explains what the project is about. You need to be sensitive to your audience and be creative. In one case, the company went as far as building a physical model of the proposed project. It clearly showed the indigenous areas, where the project would be located, and how people would be affected. This helps to find a common language, which is the only way to get to a result that will be acceptable to all, and that will last for a long time.