

# RECOMMENDATION FOR ORGANISATIONS TOWARDS CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

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## **Introduction**

The creation and maintenance of a good environment for participatory activities with disadvantaged and marginalised groups require particular communication competencies and capacities.

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The communication needs to mitigate the uneasiness and fears of potential participants of not being able to contribute and to express themselves in a comfortable way as an individual, but also in face of a group of participants, thus reducing potential exclusion occurrences.

## Recommendation

A typical problem - in particular in an intercultural and multilingual context - is language. This problem is not confined to mere cognitive understanding which might be tackled by translation.

**This challenge may be addressed by involving a professional mediator and/or trusted members from the communities of the invited participants.**

Nevertheless, setting up the participatory part of the project, the host needs **to have a clear idea of the own intention and the general purpose of the project, appropriate knowledge about and openness for the needs and expectations of the invited participants**, and a plan of how the intention and purpose could be realised by involving the participants as active subjects into the process.

We resume below the three key aspects to take into account when setting up a participatory project:

- **Intention and purpose:** this should go beyond the mere implementation of a project. It should be based upon the reflection of the own and the involved institution's interests, capabilities and resources, and should result in an approach tailored to this particular setting - thinking for oneself.
- **Knowledge and openness:** The own standing for the project should be anticipating expectations, interests, capabilities and resources of the addressed participants, and should be prepared to learn about these aspects during the process by learning from the experiences of the participants - thinking in the place of someone else.
- **Consistency:** The two previous aspects should be considered by the approach to implementing the project with the participants. The assumptions about how the intention and purpose of the project might be realised with the support of the host

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and the active involvement of the participants should be pondered - thinking in accordance with oneself and with one's own intention.

These three aspects of *Kant's sensus communis* are necessary for having communication that may be perceived as authentic and understood by the recipient. Appropriate communication reduces the risk of dissonance with the participants' assumptions about one's intentions.

Last, but not least, these departing points for successful communication should be based on a stance of interacting with participants as treasured counterparts.

An authentic invitation for joining a participatory project has also a strong non-verbal component, and practices of creating safe(r) spaces for joint activities are found in all cultural settings; they are a universal idea and can be intuitively understood.

Jointly creating such a space is an important step of immersion, enabling participants who are not able to communicate in the dominant language to partake; the emerging trust relationship and the following interactions are also supporting a natural language acquisition process.

This language acquisition process **should be also supported by the use of nonverbal and arts-related techniques during the project**, which can be supported in critical phases by translators or community members with good command of the host country language. The natural learning process **should be promoted by participants supporting each other**, and by a stand of the project's staff members communicating in a manner, which makes understanding easier (speaking a bit slower), **avoiding complicated grammatical structures and using supportive approaches such as presentations, pictures and written text**; however, natural language should be used consistently without trying to simplify if artificially with changed intonation, unusual wording or wrong Grammaticals.

The oral communication should be natural without distortions, only adapting mildly to ease the understanding by the listener having limited command of the language. In more critical cases, the project staff and the participants should use a third language, understood and spoken by both of them, to support the process.

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Intercultural communication usually poses challenges also beyond the mere difficulties of a better command of a new language. In particular, failed communications and misunderstandings are critical; such problems tend to emerge in communications, which require a systematic catching of the meaning by the listener. **In the case of misunderstandings, cultural differences in patterns of communicative behaviour - organisation of the entitlement to speak, modes of repairing a failed communication and references to the context - become relevant.**

Also, **the non-verbal component of communication may cause difficulties in an intercultural setting (facial expression, gesture and body language, encompassing intentional and unconscious non-verbal messages). For cases of such complications, provisions for a supportive intervention by an experienced intercultural communicator or mediator should be foreseen.**

However, communication acts do not require an intercultural setting to become sometimes awkward and dysfunctional. In any context, **being familiar with the basics of nonviolent communication (Marshall B. Rosenberg 2015<sup>1</sup>) is very helpful:**

- *Observations*: Communicating an observation without any implicit or explicit appraisal, blurring the difference between assumptions and reliable knowledge, or making diffuse references to persons.
- *Feelings*: Expressing our own feelings, instead of our own thoughts about who we are or about the perceived behaviour of others towards us.
- *Needs*: Communicating our own wishes and needs, and taking responsibility for them without complaints or allegations against others.
- *Appeals*: Expressing appeals in a clear, positive and concrete language for a deed, based on openness and empathy for counterparts.

These principles should be reflected and cultivated since they contribute to successful communication also in cases of emerging conflicts or frustrations.

However, they should not be imposed, in particular not in intercultural contexts. In such situations, culture-specific rules should be taken into account: the permissibility of

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenberg, M. (2015): Nonviolent Communication. Encinitas.

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rejections or denials (is it allowed to say no?), adequacy of addressing a potentially critical communication directly via an impartial third person who is familiar with both, or communicating in a group situation. In particular, the own competence of communicating with consideration of these rules should not be abused for dominating a discourse with someone who is not sufficiently familiar with them.