

# INTERCULTURAL ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY MODEL FOR CENTRAL AFRICA: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** *The post-colonial relations of European countries and their former African colonies are complex and sensitive, in light of past memories, economic and political interests. Africans and Europeans maintain an ongoing dialogue at all levels on political, economic, commercial, humanitarian issues and more. Intercultural communication is of great importance, and fruitful dialogue requires an ability to bridge gaps and reach a high level of mutual understanding. Theoretical and practical models have tried to offer solutions to improve dialogue. For example, Hofstede's model describes six dimensions through which cultures of different societies and nationalities can be compared. Other theories help determine criteria for optimising comparability, and for better intercultural communication. This paper aims to present the component of intercultural communication from the Intercultural Economic Diplomacy Model for Central Africa. The model was developed as part of a PhD research "Intercultural Economics Diplomacy and Cross-Cultural Encounters in Central Africa after the Discovery of Natural Resources - The Case of Equatorial Guinea". The model aims to offer a practical tool for those who wish their intercultural cooperation to be more productive. The findings of the research rely on interviews and document analysis conducted with government members and senior officials in Equatorial Guinea and UN agencies. The paper argues that intercultural communication is of great importance in dialogue with Central Africa, and will present the main recommendations drawn from the findings.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural communication; central Africa; economic diplomacy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, international interest in the Central African region has grown in light of its economic potential and the range of opportunities it offers. Many Central African countries enjoy natural resources in their territory, cheap and available labour and Local markets with unrealised commercial potential (World Bank, n.d.). These conditions create unique economic opportunities and many international factors seek to take part in this.

The immediate natural partners of Central African countries are the European countries that have ruled the region in the past. The culture of Central African countries has been influenced by European culture. Central African regulatory practices are similar to the practices of European governments (Ginio, 2012); African peoples speak European languages so that language is not an obstacle. In general, the former African colonies have a strong affinity for European countries that have operated in the region in the past. The relations

between the European countries and their former African colonies are complex and sensitive, in light of past memories and present interests (Young, 2016). Today, about five decades after the African states have gained independence, cooperation between Europeans and Central Africans is intensifying. Political and economic cooperation holds many opportunities for both parties. However, in order to succeed, it is essential to understand that this encounter of different cultural norms and behaviour should be evaluated accordingly. Productive intercultural dialogue is a prerequisite for success. Both parties of the dialogue should be well studied, and it is essential to understand their motives and cultural characteristics. The model of Intercultural Economic Diplomacy for Central Africa, developed in the framework of a PhD research "Intercultural Economics Diplomacy and Cross-Cultural Encounters in Central Africa after the Discovery of Natural Resources - The Case of Equatorial Guinea study" is intended to assist in the preparations for such intercultural dialogue and

offers a practical method toward work in Central Africa.

The original purpose of the model was to assist in formulating a strategy of economic diplomacy for representatives of countries and international organisations seeking to operate in the region. However, the model is also suitable for business factors, and for Central African officials seeking to prepare for intercultural encounters with Europeans and other foreigners. The model combines existing theoretical methods for defining cultural characteristics such as the Hofstede model of the six cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2011), and recommendations of local factors as a result of the present research. The paper will begin by describing the existing situation in Central Africa, the economic potential of the region and its cultural characteristics. The paper will present the model of intercultural economic diplomacy developed within the and the main conclusions of the research.

## 2. CENTRAL AFRICA AND EUROPE

The post-colonial relations of European and Central African countries are complex and sensitive, mainly due to colonial history. Most countries in the region gained independence in the 1960s, and some argue that for many years some European countries maintained indirect control of their former African colonies (Neuberger, 2011). Colonial language continued to be the official language. The colonial-era left many characteristics in the region, including European languages, religious influences, and more. Local government systems are based on European governance methods and are very similar to them. Some European countries relate to their former colonies and try to incorporate them into international organisations such as the Francophonie and Portuguese-Speaking Community (CPLP). European countries tended to support their former colonies in international forums by promoting African interests. Some European countries intervene in African politics in order to support governments and politicians and maintain their interests. The African countries benefit from the European support in international forums, but this poses a complicated dilemma to leaders. European support has a negative impact on their sovereignty, independence, and national pride (Neuberger, 2011; Young, 2016).

## 3. ECONOMIC INTERESTS

The Central African region has significant economic potential and many factors, countries and

businesses, want to integrate into the region's economic activities. The economic advantages of the Central African region include, among other things, a wealth of natural resources, cheap labour, emerging markets and a diverse consumer population (World Bank, n.d.). However, there are concerns among foreigners regarding the political stability of the region. In practice, the governance system of a presidential republic that is prevalent in the region allows relative short-term stability. Centralisation in bureaucratic processes is an advantage in terms of the foreign entities seeking to operate in the region since decision-making processes can be relatively quick. Another factor that increases economic potential is geopolitical stability. Colonial European countries arbitrarily set the borders of the Central African region at the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885 (Young, 2016). Once the countries of the region gained independence, they adopted, with no better alternative, the colonial borders. The colonial borders meant, in many cases, that on both sides, there is the same ethnic group, and the likelihood of violent conflict is not high. For countries that want to operate in the region, there are many opportunities in different areas, from the energy sector with oil and gas companies, executing national infrastructure projects, selling military and civilian equipment, and more.

## 4. CULTURAL EVALUATION

Culture can be defined in different ways. Culture is always described as a collective phenomenon, but it has been linked to different collectives, made up of a variety of individuals (Hofstede, 2011). Most researchers agree that culture can articulate standard cognition and joint action procedures, and that cultural phenomena include similar expressions of norms, art, self-perception, and more (Triandis, 1996).

Researchers have discussed whether universal categories can be developed through which cultural characteristics can be assessed. In the early stages, the discussion was about the level of economic development and modernisation of society (Lanski, 2016). Further researches have shown the profound relations between cultural and economic variables, for example, Liñán and Fernandez-Serrano (2014) argued that the cultural component accounts for about 60% of GDP per capita in EU countries. For a long time, researchers have tried to define dimensions through which national firms can be compared. The model developed by Hofstede defines six dimensions through which national

cultures can be compared (Hofstede, 2011): (1) Power Distance. Related to the different solutions to the fundamental problem of human inequality; (2) Uncertainty Avoidance. Related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future; (3) Individualism versus Collectivism. Related to the integration of individuals into primary groups; (4) Masculinity versus Femininity. Related to the division of emotional roles between woman and man; (5) Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation. Related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and the past; (6) Indulgence versus Restraint. Related to gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life.

Bing (2004) describes a variety of practical uses for the theoretical models. Work teams can be trained according to the cultural environment in which they are intended to operate; understanding the norms in different societies and adjust how they work; organisations will be able to develop work practices tailored to local culture, and more.

The basic unit for the analysis is the state. Most social researchers see the nation-state as a cultural framework. States encourage cultural homogeneity. Since early history, nations have been an expression of cultural similarity, as in ancient Greece or Egypt (Ronen & Shenkar, 2017). Triandis (1996) notes that almost all theories and data of contemporary psychology come from the western population (Europe, North America, Australia, etc.). However, about 70% of the world's population lives in non-western cultures. Data from non-western regions indicate that each culture can have its psychological characteristics, and for genuine worldwide research, data from all places should be combined.

The six-dimensional theory proposed by Hofstede has evolved over the years, and additional tools have been added to it, such as the theory of basic human values (Schwartz, 2012).

Hanel and Wolfradt (2018) say that people tend to believe their worldview reflects the way others see the world. They believe that people tend to relate to the values of other members in their family, city, and country.

The model presented in this paper uses existing theoretical tools together with data obtained in the field to develop a strategy that will work in the cultural context of the Central African region.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

The data that was in use during the work on the research was collected in the framework of a

doctoral research "intercultural economic diplomacy and cross-cultural encounters in Central Africa after the discovery of natural resources- the case of Equatorial Guinea". The research attempts to understand, via the local perspective, the history of the region and the changes it has undergone since the discovery of natural resources, to define the cultural and business characteristics, and to develop a working model for external factors wishing to operate in the region. The main goal of the research is to develop an intercultural economic diplomacy model, with recommendations based on the regions' unique characteristics. The main research question is what components might comprise a model of intercultural economic diplomacy for Central Africa. The research was carried out in the qualitative approach. The qualitative research collects its data from the natural system and allows the understanding of personal experience, actions, and motifs, rather than examining existing theories (Hays & Wood, 2011). The qualitative approach attaches importance to the meaning of things in the eyes of the participants (Shkedi, 2003), and in this work refers to the African's subjective perspective. The data was collected in the natural system, in Equatorial Guinea, through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with senior ministers and officials in the past and present Equatorial Guinea, and with senior UN officials operating in Central Africa. The interviewees selected to participate in the research are those who can contribute to the research because of their current role or unique experience. The interviewees were chosen based on a personal acquaintance or appropriate recommendations of reliable local people with suitable backgrounds.

The research approach is a case study, which assumes that it is possible to investigate a specific case and learn about the entire group (Yin, 2012). This research investigates the case of Equatorial Guinea, but the conclusions are also relevant to other Central African countries.

The qualitative research consisted of three stages. The first stage aims to describe historical, economic and diplomatic processes, the second stage aims to examine the intercultural economic relations of Equatorial Guinea with the international community, and the third stage aims to develop a working model for Central Africa. The research tools were, in all stages, semi-structured in-depth interviews, document analysis, and a focus group discussion.

## 6. MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY FOR CENTRAL AFRICA

The analysis of the findings, and the conclusions drawn from the discussion, enabled the formulation of recommendations for a model of intercultural economic diplomacy for Central Africa. The model combines existing theories with data, information and recommendations obtained from local factors during the research. The model suggests a method of a structured process for gathering and analysing theoretical knowledge and combining it with data from the field. The model offers tools to formulate a suitable data-based strategy for the region, and includes the six following phases:

**Module 1. Political and diplomatic background:** After selecting the target area, the material collection phase begins. The initial information comes from literature and digital sources. The information will be analysed to understand the country's position in the international system and the variety of forces that affect it. The emphasis at this stage is on understanding the country's place and interests in the international arena.

**Module 2. Investigating the Economic Environment:** Study the local economic structure based on official information published by the state and information from international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank. Understanding the influence of the existence of natural resources, if any, on the state in economic, social and diplomatic aspects. Study of two economic parameters: The degree of economic dependence on the export of the natural resource, and the level of economic exposure to fluctuations in prices of commodities and exchange rates. At this point, it is recommended to visit the site for information verification and initial contacts.

**Module 3. Mapping the decision-making environment:** Most Central African countries are a presidential republic. The president is the head of state and holds extensive powers. To a large extent, understanding the president's motives and familiarity with his immediate surroundings will enable a better understanding of the state's conduct. Studying a leader includes knowing his biography, his motives and the people around him. It is essential to understand his ethnic affiliation and his relations with his extended family. In Central African countries, the decision-makers are exposed to external pressure and these factors should be identified and mapped.

**Module 4. Economic Diplomacy Strategy:** For countries and international organisations working in Central Africa, economic diplomacy offers a variety of tools. At the political level, it is advisable to examine the possibilities of influencing the country through economic pressure levers. On the economic level, it is advisable to explore the possibility of promoting economic interests through political pressure or support in the international arena. On the other hand, for Central African countries the use of economic diplomacy tools is an opportunity to gain support in various international forums through the assistance of countries operating in their territory, as well getting their support to advance national economic interests.

**Module 5. Characterising Local Culture:** It is advisable to study the cultural characteristics of the Central African region. At the state level, the specific characteristics of dominant ethnic groups must be recognised. It is advisable to characterise the local culture according to existing theoretical models.

**Module 6. Intercultural aspects:** The purpose of this phase is to characterise the intercultural encounter and to increase mutual understanding towards collaboration. Foreign culture will be characterised according to theoretical models with the same tools used to characterise culture in the African country. A comparison will be made between the different national cultures, and a framework will be created to identify differences and cross-cultural gaps. Given the data obtained, strategy and recommendations for working in a different cultural environment will be formulated.

## 7. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The research demonstrates the importance of intercultural communication for factors seeking to operate in Central Africa, and that mutual cultural understanding is a prerequisite for success. Various studies have shown that intercultural communication is essential to the success in international trade, and for management in a different cultural environment (Ng and Lillevik, 2017). For years, economics and culture were seen as different and distinct areas, but today the relations are clear (Reuveni and Gordon, 2012).

Through storytelling and descriptions of events, as well as learning from various actors' practical experience, the socio-cultural context can be better understood. However, professional guidance is required to move from emotional experience to

professional insights (Soderberg, 2017). The model attempts to address this need.

The Cultural, economic research attempts to explain why nations with similar political and natural characteristics have different economic performance (Rongxing, 2012), and in the present research attempts have been made to formulate a working method to allow to overcome difficulties and to understand the causes better. Jonasson and Lauring (2012) argue that differences in individuals' cultural values create problems in intercultural communication, and the present research findings support this. Therefore, not only the differences between nationalities but also the differences in the values of individuals must be noted. Foreigners in Central Africa do not always manage to communicate well, and the differences in communication styles create obstacles. The present study, conducted in Equatorial Guinea, shows, for example, that representatives of US and Chinese companies operating intensively in the country have communication difficulties with the locals. For Europeans, especially from countries that have ruled the region in the past, there is a definite advantage in intercultural communication compared to others operating in Central Africa. The effects of European culture, left by the colonial countries in the region, is still evident and facilitate the mutual ties. The language, the methods of governance, the structure of the educational systems, and more, create a convenient platform for better intercultural communication. However, the Africans still had much sediment from the colonial era, and that is a disadvantage for Europeans. It is essential to understand how the locals in Central Africa perceive the colonial era and respect their feelings.

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