Pre-Travel Cultural Preparation

Example resource directly from Engineers Without Borders USA in June 2024.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gj9VR1X5cof7tc2QoY6oippEcipQuP9p/view?usp=sharing

A list of how and what to research prior to doing fieldwork where you will engage with different cultures. Culture can change region to region so be mindful of that when conducting your pre-travel cultural preparation.

fieldsafe.colorado.edu

Engineers Without Borders USA

Cultural Awareness Guidebook

This guidebook is intended to support Engineers Without Borders USA (EWB-USA) project teams and travelers with adequate awareness, knowledge, training, and resources to successfully work with different cultures. This guidebook will set the stage for cultural preparation of projects teams partnering with communities throughout the world. Included in this guidebook are activities, resources, and suggested topics for both individual and group discussions. *A special thanks to ICP Reviewers Allen Boyd, Tom Power, and Greg Smith, for their collective contributions on elevating the critical need and foundations for building cultural awareness and actionable preparation methods for EWB-USA project teams.*

- [Preparing to Cross Cultures](#) (Group Activity - 30 minutes)
- The Spirit Catches You and You fall Down by Anne Fadiman (350+ page book)

Pre-Travel Cultural Preparation

Just as project teams prepare for the technical needs of a project, it is necessary to investigate and research the people and cultures the team will be engaging with. To assist project teams in preparing for their engagement and partnership with a host community, the following list can be used as a guide for researching different areas and facets of what makes up a culture. **Keep in mind that even within a country there may be significant cultural differences from one region to another and from one community to another**. Project teams and individuals should begin researching these items prior to traveling and be mindful when interacting with community members and local partners. Developing and improving cultural awareness is an ongoing effort throughout the life cycle of the project which requires honesty and humility. While the list below is not exhaustive, it is a good starting point and framework for cultural preparation and should be refined from trip to trip.

- Historical, Geographical, and Climate Context
  - Basic history of the country
  - Geography of the area
- Current Political Situation
  - Internal stability, issues, and risks
  - Historical and current relations with the U.S.
- People
  - Ethnic, racial, tribal, and cultural demographics
  - How the demographic divisions interact
- Power Structure
  - Overview of community organization and governance
  - Centers of hard and soft (influence) power within the community
  - Existing organizations, e.g. water committee, NGOs, INGOs, and roles
- Language and Communication Style
  - Language(s)
  - Formal or informal, direct or indirect communication styles
  - Body language and gestures
- Economics, Resources, and Sustenance
  - What is the community standard of living and why
  - Typical jobs and trades within in the community
  - Resources and facilities available to the community
  - Typical diet, water availability
- Community Layout
  - Access to services (government, health, transportation, education, etc.)
  - Local facilities (clinic, schools, municipal buildings, community halls, etc.)
  - Local transportation used by community members

- Cultural Norms, Traditions, Religion and Dress
  - Project kick-off or welcoming ceremonies, blessings, farewells
  - Identification and role of religion and faith within the community
  - Local dress
- Sex and Gender
  - Male-female roles and responsibilities
  - LGBTQ+
- Education
  - Level of average education within the community
  - How the community views and values education
- Health and Welfare
  - Health risks, issues, and concerns within in the community
  - Health beliefs
  - General welfare to the community
- Information Technology
  - How information is transmitted and received within the community
  - How the team should best transmit and receive information
- Individualism vs. Collectivism
  - Role of collective community and community leadership
  - Degree of individualism commonly present within the community
  - Impacts to team communication to/from the community
- Money and Trade
  - Role of money and bartering within the community
  - How money is valued and exchanged
  - Perception of Americans
  - Wealth and poverty
  - Gift-giving considerations, expectations, and limitations
- Family
  - Roles and responsibilities of family member(s)
  - Nepotism
  - Importance, or lack thereof, of family in the community

Guidance on Cultural Research

Data gathering and information to support pre-trip cultural preparation can be found in a variety of forms and media. Online culture and travel guides exist for practically every country and region in comprehensive to summary levels of detail. To assist in the cultural preparation, we recommend using the following credible resources for their thorough and useful guides on language, culture, customs, and etiquette:
- International SOS
- Peace Corps
- U.S. Department of State
- Central Intelligence Agency

- [Air University Field Guides](#)
- [Commisceo Guides](#)
- [The World Factbook](#)

Non-EWB-USA Networks

There are many advantages for project teams to seek US-based contacts to support cultural awareness training and knowledge. From providing an overview of the host country to specific cultural information to building techniques, travel tips, personal connections. To help project teams identify contacts in the US who could support your work and cultural training awareness we have put together some suggestions on various places to look. You might be surprised at how many networks exist once you start looking!

- **Universities/Colleges** - There are often country or culture-specific organizations at universities and those are good places to start. Reach out to your university of college's study abroad programs, language departments, student exchange programs, international development, etc.
- **Engineering Associations** - Organizations like IEEE and ASCE can be another way to find contacts either through directories or meetings.
- **Donors** - Don't be afraid to ask your donors if they know any US or international contacts. It's also a way to get them more involved in the project!
- **NGOs** - Look for groups already working in your host-country and see if they may have contacts who can support cultural awareness trainings (i.e. Rotary)

Also, don't forget to tap into your existing EWB-USA networks!

- **Other Chapters** - Chapters at or near universities with international students and faculty members who may, in fact, be willing to provide personal insights, interpretation, and instruction for the country and culture of interest to the travel team. Personal knowledge and experience is invaluable, and outreach to such resources is highly encouraged!
- **Volunteer Village** - EWB-USA itself is rich with experience about the culture and engagements in numerous countries. A chapter preparing to travel to a new area will typically find other chapters with prior experience in that country, within the local culture, and possibly even near the specific community. Outreach to Standing Content Committees and other chapters with experience in the destination country and culture is also highly encouraged. Use the [ICP Project Summary Dashboard](#) to filter by country and connect with those chapters within Volunteer Village!
- **Lessons Learned** - You can also review [Lessons Learned](#) and filter by country and category (Travel/Logistics and Community and CBO). Since EWB-USA is a learning organization we strive to learn from past mistakes, big and small, to constantly improve our efficiency and effectiveness in delivering community-driven projects. Project teams can support this effort by writing helpful lessons learned on cultural awareness, differences, and challenges.
- **EWB-USA Country Offices** - If your project team is working in a country with an EWB-USA Country Office, reach out to the staff as well as view Country Office [E-Learning Courses](#)

available in Volunteer Village. They can often give insight into local culture beyond what can be researched.

Members of the project team, and Cultural Champion, will find that cultural information is easily available, produced, and ready for tailoring for travel preparation. Project teams should complete a pre-travel cultural briefing followed by a group discussion tailored to their needs. All travelers should be walked through a discussion of the above checklist and its relevance for their upcoming trip.

Recommended Supporting and Learning Activities
- Invite a speaker to your chapter meeting from that country (Group activity - 2 hours)
- Dealing with Cultural Diversity in Project Management (Individual or Group Activity - 60 minutes)
- Features of Culture (Group Activity - 30 minutes)
- Contextual Engineering EWB-USA Conference Presentation, by University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- Lehigh Valley Professional Chapter Travel Book - Sierra Leone (Example)
- Indianapolis Professional and Trine University Chapter Cultural Preparation - Ecuador (Example)

Demonstrating Cultural Awareness In-Country

Congratulations! Your project team has worked hard and done the research to understand the nuances unique to your in-country partners and their culture. Now it's time to apply your understanding of cultural awareness through your interactions with your community partners as well as conduct periodic assessments of that awareness as it matures while in-country.

It's important to remember that we are guests and to always remain respectful of cultural differences even if you may not agree with them. Continue to keep an open mind through observation, listening, and learning from your partners on the ground. When given the opportunity to participate in local activities please do. Participating in local activities is a great way to build camaraderie and show respect for their local culture or not making any cultural faux pas that could negatively impact project and community relations. To help highlight this point, read about a real life example that occurred with a team in the Caribbean.

"While working in the Caribbean on an infrastructure project, a team was helping to assemble a second story on a building. This involved bringing bricks to the second floor. The local people formed a line and started passing bricks up from one person to another. A member from the US decided that this wasn't efficient and spent their time designing a pulley system to raise the bricks to the second story. Not only did this behavior annoy the local people, but the member missed a great opportunity to show respect, participate in local traditions, and help build team camaraderie."