BRIDGING DIFFERENCES OR WIDENING GAPS?

Why Intercultural Engagement Shapes Lasting Change

AN APPROACH AS ESSENTIAL AS IT IS TRANSFORMATIVE

Imagine designing a solution for a community you've never visited, based on assumptions you've never tested. What could go wrong? Chances are high that resources are wasted, trust erodes, and well-intentioned efforts fall flat or even cause harm. Too often, this is what happens when intercultural engagement is overlooked.

At its core, intercultural engagement is the practice of working across differences—of culture, geography, generation, worldview, discipline, or lived experience—to understand how people make meaning, build trust, and shape solutions. It recognizes that "culture" extends far beyond race or ethnicity; it includes any set of shared values, traditions, and perspectives that influence how people see the world and act within it. It invites us to look through multiple, interconnected lenses—such as gender, region, or religion—to better understand the forces shaping behavior and decision-making.

Intercultural engagement changes how we define problems—and even what we consider to be a problem. It shifts how solutions take shape by working with, not for, the people most affected. It is often framed as a theory, mindset, training, or value, but rarely as a concrete practice. This piece bridges that gap. It focuses on how public agencies, nonprofits, and community leaders can embed intercultural engagement into everyday systems and decisions. It translates principles into actions that can be applied immediately in how we design programs, deliver services, craft communication, and build lasting community relationships.

As this work moves from principle to practice, it is important not to conflate intercultural engagement with authentic engagement. Authentic engagement describes what engagement looks like when it is done well. Intercultural engagement describes the practice that makes that possible—how people with different identities, lived experiences, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds engage with one another in intentional ways to understand context, surface shared concerns, and shape decisions together through collective sensemaking, even without full agreement.

TWO WINDOWS INTO PRACTICE

Intercultural engagement comes to life in the real challenges communities face every day. The stories that follow reflect a familiar pattern: when systems are built without understanding people's realities or histories, even well-intentioned solutions fall short. And when communities are respected as partners and co-designers, solutions strengthen—and so do relationships.

These stories are not presented as intercultural engagement, yet they reflect elements of the practice—such as cultural resonance, co-learning, and adaptation to local context. They help illustrate what becomes possible when cultural context, governance, identity, and lived experience are treated as foundational, not an afterthought.

Kansas and Colorado Mental Health Support Rooted in Place and Identity

In rural Kansas and Colorado, farmers and ranchers experience some of the highest suicide rates in the United States, linked to economic instability, isolation, and the emotional weight of generational land stewardship. Mainstream mental health services often struggle to reach or support them, relying on clinical models that do not reflect the realities or values of agricultural life. To address this gap, practitioners introduce the LandLogic Model[1], an approach that integrates farmers' relationships with land into mental health support. The model grounds clinical conversations in familiar contexts, identities, and metaphors from farming. Sessions take place in familiar settings—barns, co-ops, pastures, even the front seat of a truck using the language of soil, weather, and harvest cycles as metaphors for stress, resilience, and renewal.

Rather than asking farmers to navigate conventional clinical settings, the model adapts to the cultural context of farming life: its place, profession, values, and identity. Anecdotes from providers and participants suggest that this approach can make support feel more personally relevant—sometimes even as an extension of farmers' commitment to caring for the land—creating openings for conversations that might not occur otherwise.

The LandLogic Model is not identified by its practitioners as intercultural engagement, but it reflects several elements of the practice—cultural resonance, context—aware design, and meeting people where they are rather than expecting them to navigate systems designed without them in mind. It shows what becomes possible when the starting point is identity, place, and lived experience, not assumptions about what support should look like.

---

1 Training and support model integrating agricultural culture into mental health care. agupdate.com/iowafarmertoday/opinion/columnists/farm_and_ranch_life/landlogic-connecting-farmers-health-identity/article_7abfca32-7bd6-11ed-97dd-378740eb06bd.html

Navajo Nation: Co-Designing Water Access Through Cultural Context

For decades, roughly one in three households across the Navajo Nation lacked running water, according to federal estimates. Earlier water access projects, often led by outside agencies, frequently failed because they didn't account for the region's varied terrain, the sovereign governance of Tribal decision-making, or the the cultural norms that shape how resources are shared and managed.

In 2014, DigDeep[2], a non-Native nonprofit organization, partnered with Navajo communities to co-design water delivery systems, including in-home plumbing and off-grid solar water heaters. The project's progress is rooted in its community-led, culturally grounded approach. Through community interviews, the hiring of Navajo staff, and respect for traditional knowledge and ways of life, solutions reflected local needs, values, and expertise.

Today, the Navajo Water Project continues to expand, serving thousands of families across three states and delivering more than a million gallons of safe water each year.

Although not identified as intercultural engagement, DigDeep's approach demonstrates what becomes possible when design reflects place, culture, governance, and community direction.

These aren't isolated stories. From rural towns navigating water scarcity and urban neighborhoods planning public transit, to developing community programs, solutions designed without cultural context or community partnership often fail to meet real needs. While solutions shaped with those elements are more likely to take root.

2 DigDeepU.S. nonprofit focused on domestic water access; partner on the Navajo Water Project. More at: digdeep.org and digdeepimpact.org

THE CASE FOR INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Across sectors, we see a familiar pattern: efforts falter when solutions are designed without cultural context or partnership, and they strengthen when identity, place, and lived experience shape decisions. Intercultural engagement builds on this pattern with intention.

It's not just a process—it's a paradigm shift. One that changes how we understand problems, design solutions, and define success. It centers the people most affected by an issue, values their context and experience, and creates space for shared understanding, co-creation, and lasting solutions. It asks institutions to move from outreach to partnership, from informing to listening, and from program delivery to shared design. It shifts power, perspective, and pace—placing relationships at the heart of results.

Whether you're redesigning a community program, developing a communication strategy, increasing civic participation, improving service delivery or strengthening your workforce, intercultural engagement offers a way to bridge divides and build strategies that resonate. When people see themselves reflected in the process, they invest in the outcome.

Resource Reorientation

Adopting an intercultural approach is less about adding new line items to a budget and more about reorienting how existing resources are used—especially time, relationships, staffing, and decision-making authority.

In practice, this approach often requires:

- **Time investment** for trust-building, iterative feedback loops, making and correcting mistakes and ongoing relationship cultivation (rather than pushing straight to deliverables).
- **Staffing flexibility and capacity** for facilitation and liaison roles—sometimes leveraging and compensating community members as co-facilitators—interpretation, translation, and **transcreation**, as needed.
- **Institutional openness** to slower cycles, adapting policies and protocols, and shifting some aspects of decision-making to community members.
- **Supportive practices** such as training in **cultural humility** or conflict resolution, providing logistical resources (transportation, childcare, stipends, accessible venues), and maintaining a practice of learning, reflection, and course correction over time.

What is Intercultural Engagement?

Intercultural engagement is the active, intentional collaboration among people from different cultural and social backgrounds. It moves beyond simple interaction to shared learning and co-creation—bringing together diverse perspectives to understand, design, and act together.

It is built on relationship-centered collaboration grounded in deep listening, cultural humility, and mutual understanding. Facilitated internally or with external partners, this approach creates space for people to share ideas, experiences, and cultural norms. Through respectful

dialogue, they begin to understand one another, recognize shared values, and find common ground—not necessarily by agreeing on every issue, but by listening with openness and acknowledging each other's perspectives. The experience of being heard contributes to a foundation for future collaboration and, over time, genuine relationship-building.

Communities are diverse and rarely monolithic, shaped by intersecting identities—the overlapping aspects of their background and social identities—that influence how people see the world and experience it. These include age, gender, race, ethnicity, faith, geography, income/socio-economic status, and sexual orientation that influence how individuals engage with, react to, and prioritize an issue. Their **power**, or perception of power, also affects how they engage in decision-making. Recognizing these complexities is key to meaningful intercultural engagement.

By bridging divides and increasing understanding, intercultural engagement fosters connections between what initially may seem like different communities with not much in common—such as rural and urban communities, recent immigrants and Tribal Nations, younger and older generations, long-established families and communities that feel left behind, discriminated against or that have historically faced barriers to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Creating spaces where different voices come together leads to better solutions and a stronger path forward.

Intercultural engagement begins with understanding—but its power lies in what that understanding makes possible.

Why Does Intercultural Engagement Matter?

Lasting solutions begin with understanding—of people, their experiences, and the context in which they live and work. Intercultural engagement helps uncover what matters most to those involved, creating space for shared insight and collaboration. When people understand one another, they can make better decisions together, design approaches that fit real circumstances, surface and balance trade-offs, and build momentum that lasts.

Intercultural engagement goes beyond surface-level conversations to lay the groundwork for deeper collaboration and mutual respect, increasing the chances for lasting results.

Here's why it matters:

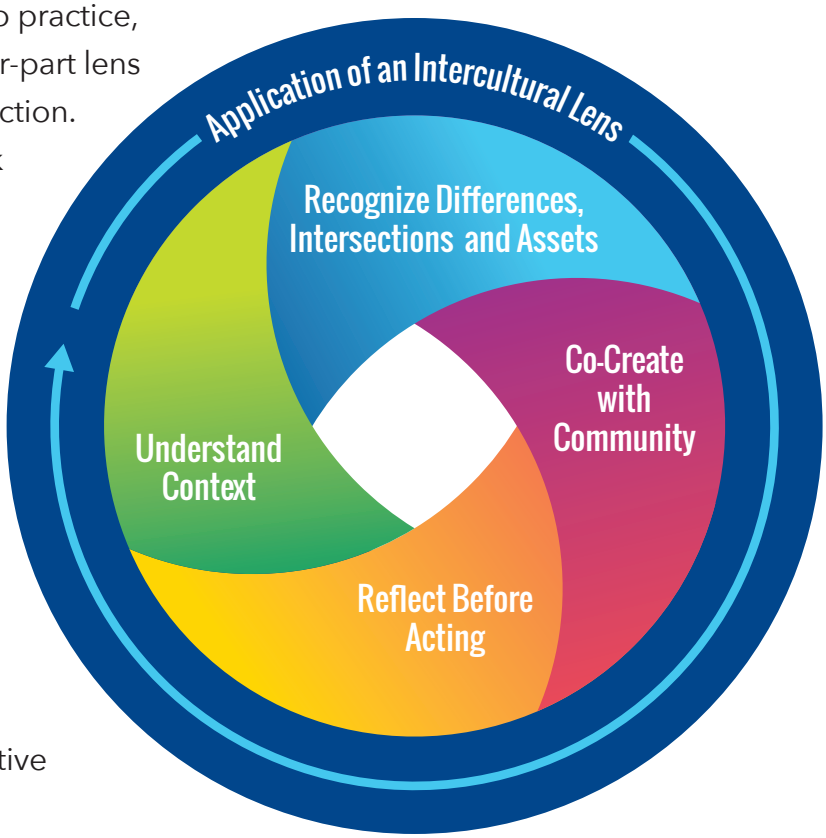
- **Builds Understanding and Reduces Conflict**
  Open dialogue helps people hear and see perspectives they may not have encountered—or may have misunderstood—before. It creates space to recognize where experiences align and where they differ. Misunderstandings can be addressed early, stereotypes can be challenged, and shared values can emerge, making collaboration smoother and conflict less likely.
- **Incorporates a Range of Perspectives**
  When different viewpoints are included, solutions become more practical, inclusive, and durable, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches that often miss local realities.
- **Strengthens Collaboration and Shared Ownership**
  Working together from the start builds mutual accountability and buy-in, leading to strategies people are more invested in sustaining.

- **Encourages Meaningful Dialogue and Learning**
  Thoughtfully designed spaces invite people to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and learn from one another—leading to fresh ideas and better outcomes.
- **Produces Solutions That Fit the Context**
  When solutions are designed with communities, they're more relevant, accessible, and effective because they are grounded in real experience and priorities.

Whether advancing community health and mental well-being, securing access to clean water, advocating for the broad range of freedoms that matter to people, or addressing any other social issue, experience shows that communication, policies, and programs are more effective when they are grounded in the values, lived experiences, and perspectives of those most affected by them. Intercultural engagement makes that grounding possible.

APPLYING AN INTERCULTURAL LENS

To put intercultural engagement into practice, at Metropolitan Group, we use a four-part lens that helps turn understanding into action. The lens serves as both a framework and a mindset it prompts reflection, informs strategy, and strengthens alignment with community needs.



This approach moves beyond individual differences to focus on how groups can work together across cultural boundaries and community strengths—through shared understanding and values—to create solutions. It is an ongoing process of inquiry, learning, and co-creation that keeps engagement active and adaptive over time.

The intercultural lens includes four interconnected areas of inquiry that help teams think critically, collaborate effectively, and align strategies with the people and places they serve.

Each area builds on the others. For every area, we include a set of questions to guide deeper thinking and analysis as you engage with communities and refine your work. Not all questions will apply in every context, but together they serve as valuable prompts for intentional exploration, learning, and group reflection.

As the work evolves, the lens can be used as a continuous loop to regularly revisit strategies, integrate new insights, and adapt approaches as conditions change.

The Intercultural Lens serves three key purposes:

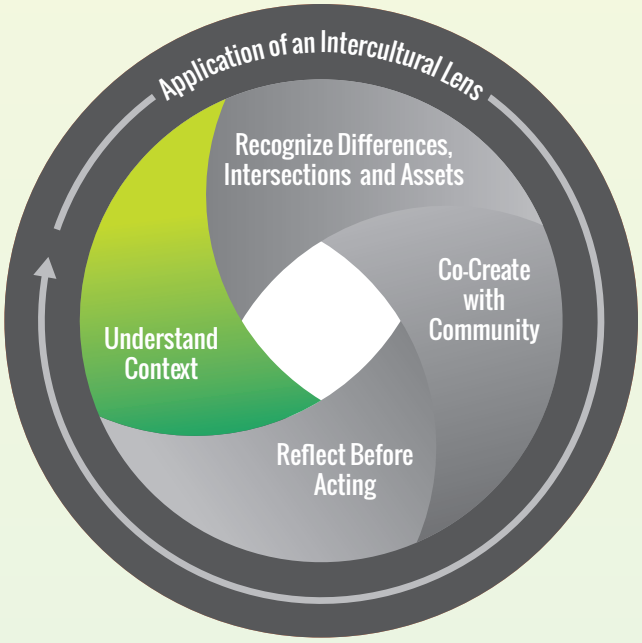
1) **An Organizing Principle:** Identifies real needs and shapes strategies, processes, decisions, and communication approaches.

2) **A Prompt for Dialogue:** Encourages curiosity, challenges assumptions, and uncovers overlooked perspectives.

3) **A Guide to Tailored Engagement and Communication:** Ensures outreach, engagement and communication materials and tools are relevant to the specific communities involved.

UNDERSTAND CONTEXT

Understanding a community's cultural, historical, and social context is essential. Engaging community members early helps confirm findings, uncover assumptions, and identify misperceptions before they shape decisions.

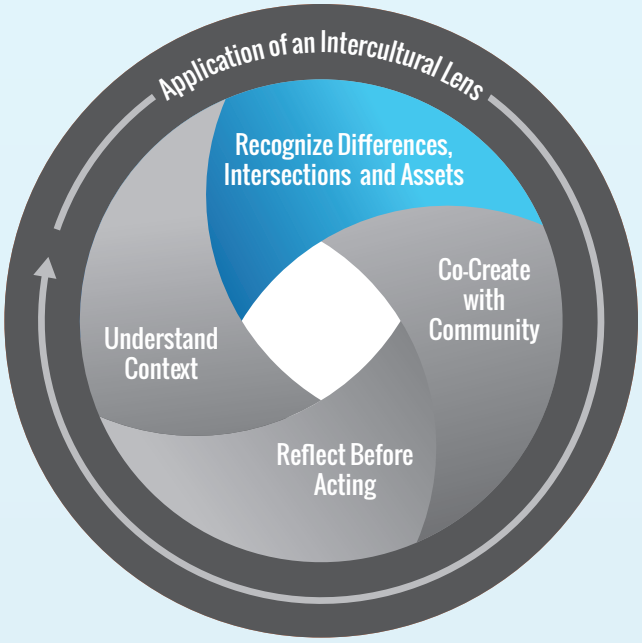


Key Questions:

- How are different populations affected by this issue?
- What historical experiences, beliefs, worldviews, traditions, or narratives shape how information is received, interpreted, and acted upon?
- How is this specific issue or opportunity experienced and perceived?
- Whose perspectives frame the problem, and whose voices are missing?
- What power dynamics exist, and how do they influence possible solutions?

RECOGNIZE DIFFERENCES, INTERSECTIONS, AND ASSETS

Through dialogue, it's important to understand both differences and commonalities, and how these intersect. A strength-based approach highlights assets and shared values while acknowledging distinct experiences. This understanding builds unity and lays the groundwork for collaborative solutions.

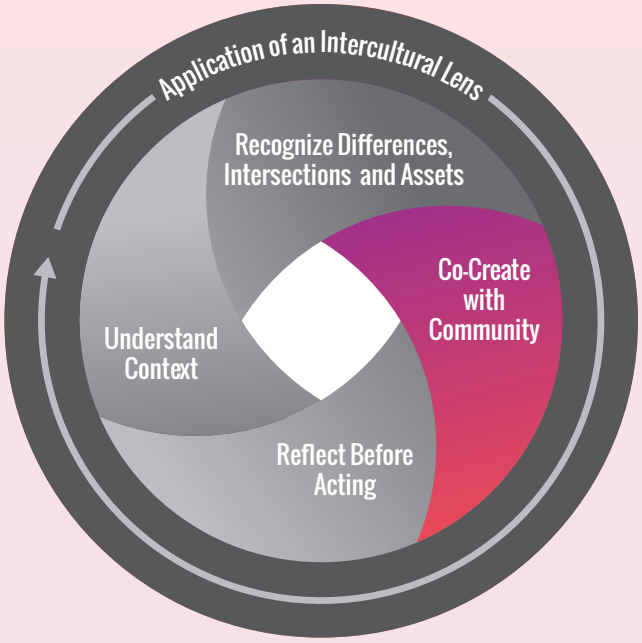


Key Questions:

- What values tend to surface or create tension around this issue? Where are values shared, and where do they differ across communities?
- What similarities and differences exist in how communities define the problem—and how they or believe it should be addressed?
- What community assets and strengths can help identify and advance solutions?
- Who benefits from the current system, and who is burdened or excluded by it? What factors perpetuate these dynamics?
- What power structures exist within and across communities, and how do they influence decision-making?
- Whose voices are still missing, and how can they be meaningfully included?
- How do community members confirm or challenge our assumptions and findings?

CO-CREATE WITH COMMUNITY

Co-creation centers community voices in decision-making and balances power dynamics. Effective co-creation happens when strategies are developed *with*, not *for*—the people they impact. It requires time, transparency, and shared ownership to ensure the work reflects real needs and priorities.

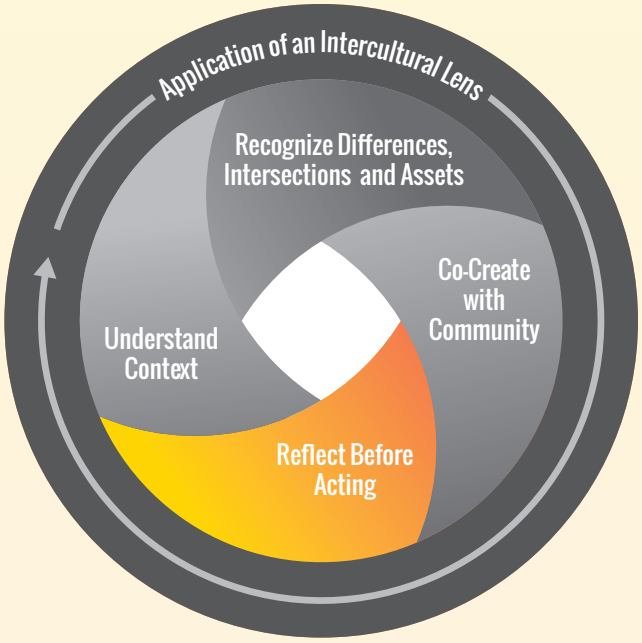


Key Questions:

- Are the people designing and implementing solutions—including content creators, architects, engineers, policymakers, and program leads—reflective of the communities affected?
- What supports or conditions are needed to make co-creation authentic and effective? How will power imbalances be addressed?
- How do different communities define the issue or opportunity, and what shared definition can guide collaboration?
- What solutions do communities identify as most relevant to their needs, and where do similarities or differences emerge?
- How is success being defined and measured, and does it align with community priorities rather than externally imposed standards?
- How can materials or messages be transcreated to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance?

REFLECT BEFORE ACTING

Reflection ensures that solutions remain transparent, intentional, and aligned with community priorities. It provides an opportunity for the team to assess whether policies, programs, or actions are advancing fairness, addressing unintended impacts, and staying responsive to what communities value most.



Key Questions

- Which community strengths were identified but not fully integrated into the solution design, and what can we learn from that?
- Do the proposed solutions address community priorities and open new opportunities?
- Are there potential unintended consequences that could reinforce inequities or barriers?
- Can the solution be sustained over time with available resources and support?
- How will progress and outcomes be shared back with the community?
- Based on reflection, what adjustments or refinements can improve the approach?
- How will communities and stakeholders be re-engaged to confirm insights and co-shape next steps?

Reflection often reveals not only what's working, but also where intentions and realities diverge. Engaging across cultures and perspectives can surface discomfort, disagreement, or competing priorities, and that's a natural part of the process. Rather than signaling failure, these tensions are signs of honest engagement and opportunities for learning.

The next section explores some of the most common trade-offs organizations encounter and offers practical ways to navigate them.

NAVIGATING TENSIONS AND TRADE-OFFS

While intercultural engagement offers powerful promise, it also brings real tensions and trade-offs. Working across cultures and systems means navigating different expectations, priorities, and ways of working. Recognizing where these differences may surface—and preparing to address them early—helps prevent misunderstandings and sustain collaboration over time. The following sections highlight some of the most common challenges organizations encounter and offer practical strategies for working through them.

1. The Stated Vision for Success Has Not Been Fully Thought Through

Sometimes an organization's stated goals sound clear in theory but haven't been fully considered in practice. As organizations move from a monocultural perspective—one that overlooks or minimizes difference—to one that values and integrates diverse perspectives and approaches, change naturally follows.

That change happens at many levels: personal (beliefs and attitudes), interpersonal (communication and collaboration), institutional (policies and procedures), and cultural (norms and expectations). Bringing in new people—especially from groups not previously engaged, whether as staff, volunteers, clients, members, investors, donors, or community partners—can reshape how an organization or coalition operates. It can influence communications, how decisions are made, meetings are managed, and consensus is built. It may even affect how a product is developed or how a public initiative or campaign is planned and delivered.

Recommended Practice

Anticipate change before you begin. Ask:

- What changes will occur once we achieve what we say we want?
- Are we truly prepared for success?
- What systems, structures, or mindsets may need to evolve for that success to last?

2. Slower Timelines and Delayed Deliverables

Building relationships, co-designing solutions, and incorporating feedback take time and a long-term view. Tension often arises when teams doing community engagement face pressure from internal leaders or funders to meet short-term deadlines. Pushing quickly toward a decision before relationships are established can create frustration and erode trust. The process begins to feel transactional rather than genuine, and opportunities for learning and co-creation are lost. While the upfront investment may be higher, it can also save resources by preventing failed solutions and rework.

Recommended Practice

- Build additional time into project plans for relationship-building, feedback, and follow-up to earn trust over time.
- Set realistic expectations, and clarity about what they look like, with leaders and funders before launching new efforts.
- Phase work so that early relational efforts are in place before scaling up.
- Embrace the value in new approaches and be patient with the change process.

3. Power Tensions and Conflicts

Conversations across difference inevitably surface disagreement and discomfort, especially when historically, the allocation of resources or decision-making power have been unevenly distributed. Many communities have experienced competition for limited resources, historical distrust of institutions, or conflicting priorities between groups. When these tensions arise, the goal isn't to avoid them. It's to work through them in ways that strengthen and/or repair relationships and improve understanding over time.

Recommended Practice

- Facilitate conflict rather than avoid it. Provide structured, supported opportunities for participants to express and work through disagreement.
- Develop shared community agreements that define values-aligned behavior and psychological safety; revisit them regularly.
- Create spaces where everyone can fully participate and be heard. When participants feel their perspectives are considered, they are more likely to share ownership of the process and outcomes.
- Use plain language materials, visual notetaking where appropriate, and tools that allow for anonymous input—such as confidential digital polls and pre/post surveys—with real-time synthesis to reflect collective contributions. Accommodate different learning styles and languages.
- Create spaces where everyone can fully participate and address power dynamics that may inhibit participation.
- Acknowledge the limits of any single perspective or story.
- Recognize that tension, when navigated with care, can be productive, leading to stronger collaboration and better solutions.

4. Ambiguous Decision-making

When roles, authority, and decision-making structures aren't clearly defined, participants can feel confused, tokenized, or disempowered. Unclear expectations about who holds final authority versus shared influence can undermine trust and lead to frustration or disengagement.

Recommended Practice

- From the start define the role and level of responsibility each group or participant will have.
- Be transparent about how final decisions will be made, and revisit that understanding periodically.
- Agree early on what collaboration and shared decision-making will look like in practice.
- Establish expectations at the start but remain open to new directions or unanticipated solutions that emerge through genuine engagement.
- Create a process to flag when engagement feels off-track or out of alignment, and pause to recalibrate.

5. Unclear Metrics and Accountability Tensions

Traditional performance measures often fail to capture the relational and qualitative outcomes that are central to intercultural engagement—such as trust, mutual learning, collaboration, and shared ownership. When funders or institutional leaders expect only rigid, numeric deliverables, it can undervalue meaningful progress that is harder to quantify.

The same is true when evaluation practices are imposed on a community under the banner of being "evidence-based," without recognizing the wisdom and long standing "practice based evidence" that communities already rely on.

Recommended Practice

- Co-define success metrics with community partners from the outset.
- Include process indicators—such as participation, trust, and shared learning—alongside quantitative outputs.
- Use mixed method approaches to evaluate impact; combine storytelling, reflection, and qualitative feedback with data.
- Ensure leaders, funders and decision-makers understand that relationship-building and learning are integral markers of success, not side benefits.

6. Institutional Resistance or Inertia

Even when there is genuine interest in intercultural engagement, internal resistance often emerges. Organizations may struggle to share control, reallocate resources, or slow their pace to allow deeper collaboration. Sometimes leaders begin with a predetermined solution and hope engagement will simply confirm it, rather than opening the door to community insight and new possibilities.

Recommended Practice

- Acknowledge resistance as a natural part of change, not a sign of failure.
- Create early opportunities for leaders and staff to hear directly from community members and witness the benefits of shared decision-making.
- Start with small pilots that demonstrate value and build confidence before expanding.
- Encourage leaders to approach engagement as an ongoing learning process, one that strengthens both the integrity of the work and the organization's long-term impact.

CONCLUSION

Creating lasting change requires moving beyond isolated solutions to embrace meaningful collaboration across cultures and identities. By applying the intercultural lens, we tap into the collective strength of diverse communities and the many identities and groups within them, to co-create a better future. We also use financial and human resources more effectively, investing in approaches that succeed, rather than repeating those that fail.

Authentic intercultural engagement transforms and benefits everyone involved. It fosters mutual learning, builds respect and trust (over time), and generates solutions that reflect lived experiences and meet real community needs. When communities are deeply engaged, they take ownership of strategies, leading to more relevant and sustainable change.

If we are serious about equity, sustainability, and real impact, intercultural engagement isn't optional—it's essential. It starts with humility, grows through trust, and leads to solutions that endure.

The work is complex, but the path is clear: listen deeply, engage widely, co-create boldly, and move forward together.

These case examples from our work at Metropolitan Group, developed in partnership with local leaders and organizations, show how the intercultural lens moves from principle to practice. We share them not as perfect models, but to illustrate how the lens guides decision-making and trade-offs.

CASE EXAMPLE

FUNDING WHAT COMMUNITIES NEED: APPLYING AN INTERCULTURAL LENS TO TOBACCO PREVENTION IN OREGON

Background

In 2020, Oregon voters passed Ballot Measure 108, increasing taxes on commercial tobacco products and inhalant delivery systems. The measure, which received overwhelming public support, created an unprecedented opportunity to direct new resources to communities most harmed by commercial tobacco use, particularly those historically and systemically underserved.

Despite years of public health efforts, commercial tobacco remained a leading cause of preventable death in Oregon, with disproportionately high impacts on communities of color, Tribal Nations, immigrants and refugees, rural residents, and LGBTQ+ communities. With new funds and a clear mandate and commitment to act differently, Oregon Health Authority (OHA), the state's public health agency, partnered with Metropolitan Group (MG) to design and facilitate the co-creation of a resource allocation process grounded in community leadership and guided by an intercultural lens.

Application of the Intercultural Lens to this work

Understand Context

OHA and MG convened a diverse Community Advisory Group to guide the design and implementation of the BM108 funding strategy. Members brought trusted relationships and lived experience from across the state—urban, rural, coastal, remote—and represented both established and grassroots organizations. Some had never worked directly in public health, but all brought insight into how tobacco use intersected with broader issues such as housing insecurity, mental health, economic inequality, and systemic racism.

Community advisors shaped their vision for success: reduce tobacco consumption, address racial inequities in tobacco-related health outcomes, and ensure investments aligned with community-defined priorities. OHA committed to examining its internal systems and shifting power by centering community experience to drive both process and decision-making.

Recognizing Differences, Intersections, and Assets

The advisory group was not monolithic—and that was intentional. From the beginning, participants engaged in deep dialogue across cultural, geographic, and organizational lines. They were invited to speak from their own community contexts while holding a collective, statewide perspective. Through this lens, tobacco prevention became a vehicle to address broader community wellbeing.

Key facilitation practices strengthened the process:

- Setting shared working agreements and reviewing them at each meeting.
- Dedicating time at each meeting for trust-building and personal connection.
- Creating space to examine equity from different perspectives—race, geography, income, trauma, identity.
- Facilitating difficult conversations to work through tension, not avoid it.
- Reframing the process away from competition and toward shared power and collaboration.

This culture and mindset shift helped community members and OHA staff challenge old narratives: that only large, established organizations or local health departments can do prevention work, or that health funding must fit rigid evidence-based models (that exclude other forms of evidence). Community strengths became a core principle.

Co-Create with Community

Community voices shaped funding priorities and definitions of success. They proposed a new model for funding community organizations and influenced the grantmaking process, so it was more streamlined and did not disadvantage smaller, less resourced organizations.

Through sustained engagement, OHA staff gained a deeper understanding of how commercial tobacco use shows up differently across communities—and how upstream drivers like stress, disconnection, and economic hardship—must be addressed alongside cessation programs. Staff acknowledged the need to balance state and federal guidelines with community-validated practices, including strategies rooted in cultural traditions, place-based trauma healing, and youth leadership. Some noted it would be the impetus for lasting change, underscoring how vital it is for communities to define the problem and lead on the solutions based on their own insights and relationships.

Reflect Before Acting

Once the recommendations were done, the reflection process led to deep and difficult conversations around whether the results were leading to the more mainstream organizations in the room losing some of their funding to smaller, culturally specific organizations. There was concern around urban communities gaining more resources than rural communities. The trust that had been built over time, and the working agreements to talk through difficult topics enabled the group to find consensus. In addition, funding was eventually reallocated to increase support to rural communities.

Results

The BM108 process and its community-informed recommendations set a new precedent for how Oregon funds community-driven public health. Community-based organizations were empowered to design culturally resonant, upstream prevention models—and state reviewers began to recognize these models as legitimate, effective, and necessary.

The process also led to internal shifts at the Oregon Health Authority, including new practices for relationship-building, more collaborative grantmaking across program areas, and fewer barriers for grassroots organizations

to access funding. Additionally, the process influenced other areas of public health practice—for example, prompting similar changes in how commercial tobacco prevention funding is allocated to local public health departments, providing them with greater flexibility to tailor strategies to local needs. These changes have not only endured—they've laid the foundation for continued changes in public health policies and practices that are more inclusive, equitable, and community-led.

CASE EXAMPLE

ADVANCING GENDER JUSTICE IN TUNISIA

Background

Women make up approximately 43% of the world's agricultural labor force, yet many face poverty, low wages, and unsafe working conditions. In Tunisia, women agricultural workers make up more than 58% of the labor workforce. Yet they struggle with unfair economic systems, denial of land rights, exposure to harmful chemicals, and dangerous transportation conditions. Despite their crucial role in food production, their voices remain largely unheard in public decision-making.

Application of the Intercultural lens to this work

Understand Context

Metropolitan Group and our sister agency, Impacto Social, under contract with USAID, worked with local civil society organizations to identify opportunities to strengthen civic engagement. We learned that public empathy existed for women agricultural workers—who frequently appeared in the news as victims of transportation accidents. But their role in sustaining Tunisia's economy and culture was overlooked.

Recognize Differences, Intersections, and Assets

Research showed women agriculture workers were framed as victims rather than key contributors to the Tunisian national economy. The power of middlemen,[3] who controlled work opportunities, was a central issue.

At first sight, middlemen appeared to be the immediate problem that needed to be publicly denounced and corrected.

However, deeper analysis elevated important cultural nuances. Middlemen were prominent members of the communities in which the women lived. They were their neighbors or relatives and played a key role in connecting the women to work with farmers across the region. Denouncing them publicly not only risked the possibilities of women not getting work but would also create deep fractures within the communities in which they lived.

As middlemen and farmers were brought into the conversation, they too expressed discontent and economic struggles. They were charged high fees for fertilizer and received little profit from sales due to competition with large agribusinesses. They were often victims of police corruption and forced to pay bribes.

This issue had multiple layers of power dynamics to consider that only surfaced through the engagement of all interested parties. Success depended on centering women in a way that recognized their role, while appealing to the different actors in the system experiencing injustice. Through this process some farmers became allies, sharing their farms to hold conversations and allowing journalists to sit in.

3 Middlemen: Informal intermediaries who arrange agricultural labor by connecting workers with farmers, often in exchange for payment or influence; their role is both economic and social within the community.

Co-Create with Community

Women-led civil society organizations co-created a values-based narrative. More than 700 stakeholders, including women agricultural workers, government officials, and legal experts, refined the messaging. This process co-created a communication campaign, *Felha*, to elevate the voices of women agricultural workers and their allies—elected officials, farmers, and middlemen who were advocates for fair pay and safety. The campaign introduced a new narrative positioning women agricultural workers as key contributors and reinforcing existing and proposed policies for protection and fair compensation.

A **message guide** was distributed among key interested parties, accompanied by information workshops co-created with partners. The purpose of the workshops was to explain the issue (as defined by the communities impacted) and to increase the self-advocacy capabilities of women agricultural workers and their local allies. A short documentary was made, centering the voices of women. Tens of interviews were arranged in the local, national, and international media. An ambassador's program was created to disseminate information and engage more women in actively advocating for their cause.

Reflection Before Action

As each strategy was co-created the community-based organizations reflected before implementation. In several instances the concerns for safety and for cultural relationships resulted in adjustments. The realization that farmers and middlemen also had similar concerns with the current conditions, and if framed as the problem or villains, could create backlash and not leverage potential allies, resulted in adjustments to message framing, ally engagement, and strategy. Concerns for the safety of women agricultural workers who spoke out resulted in the development of training and strategies that included multiple voices to ensure power in numbers. Women agricultural workers speaking out used the same messages as those being delivered by allies in government, male farmers, and others.

Results

This was not only a campaign about labor rights it was a campaign about gender equity. By reframing women agricultural workers as economic contributors rather than victims, the initiative shifted cultural and policy narratives toward fairness and recognition. Women who had never spoken publicly became their own advocates, engaging with government officials and media.

The campaign was so deeply rooted in local ownership that women agricultural workers and local partners secured additional funding to continue the work on their own terms. A popular music band created a song about the movement, and women continue to build their regional and national positioning to advance the fair treatment of women in the agriculture sector of Tunisia.

FOUNDATIONAL TERMS

All definitions come from Metropolitan Group, unless otherwise cited.

Community – A group of people connected by a defining history, identity or shared experience that shapes their values and perspectives. People often belong to multiple communities at once, and may experience different expectations or tensions across them.[4]

Cultural Humility – An ongoing process of self-reflection and learning that involves recognizing and respecting differences in others, acknowledging one's own cultural lens, and remaining open to new perspectives.

Power – Power relates to influence, resources, and authority. Understanding these dimensions, and how they are exercised, is key to effective engagement. Power can take many forms: *power over*, *power to*, *power with*, and *power within*.[5]

Stakeholder – At Metropolitan Group, we use "stakeholder" to refer to individuals or groups who have a vested interest in an issue—those that are impacted by it, can influence it, or can take action to shape outcomes (whether by defining the problem, co-creating solutions, or implementing strategies). We intentionally avoid the term "audience" in intercultural engagement contexts, as it implies a passive, one-way relationship rather than a collaborative process.

We also recognize that the term "stakeholder" can carry negative connotations for many Tribal Nations and Native peoples. In Canada, its origins are associated with colonial practices in which settlers used wooden stakes to claim land, often without consent or treaty negotiation, disregarding Indigenous sovereignty. While many have sought alternative terms, no single word universally conveys the same intent.

Transcreation – A creative process that adapts messages and visuals to be culturally resonant and emotionally meaningful across languages and communities. Transcreation goes beyond literal translation it preserves intent and emotional tone while ensuring content reflects cultural context, language nuance, literacy level, and regional communication styles.

A key distinction between translation and transcreation lies in the skill sets required. Traditional translation focuses on linguistic accuracy but may overlook cultural nuance. Transcreation not only preserves meaning but captures emotional resonance, ensuring both message and visuals connect authentically across cultures.

---

4 Adapted from the Centre for Public Impact, Toby Lowe 'What is 'community and why is it important' to reflect Metropolitan Group's experience working with organizations and communities around the world. medium.com/centre-for-public-impact/what-is-community-2e895219a205

5 Adapted from Powercube Net. Expressions of power. www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/expressions-of-power/

AUTHORS

Principal author

Maria Elena Campisteguy
Senior Executive Vice President/Principal leads Metropolitan Group's intercultural engagement practice

Contributing author

Fernanda Salazar Mejia
Social impact, policy, and advocacy strategist

ABOUT METROPOLITAN GROUP

We help leaders and organizations design with, not for, the communities they serve. Our work spans strategic communication, organizational strategy and innovation, and capacity building—shifting narratives, strengthening systems, and supporting cross-sector solutions that last.

Metropolitan Group (MG) and our sister company, Impacto Social Metropolitan Group (ISMG), are full-service strategic and creative agencies with global reach. For over 30 years, our dedicated intercultural engagement practice has been applied in partnership with foundations, public agencies, and community–based organizations across five continents.

We apply an intercultural lens to research, design, and implementation, supporting people and communities to define challenges, co-create strategies, and deliver impact.

Learn more at **metgroup.com**.

Metropolitan Group
the power of voice