



## THE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE ACQUIRED IN MILITARY OPERATIONS. ANOTHER PASSAGE TO I(NDIA)?

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**Abstract:** *The spectrum of military operations conducted in various geographical areas by coalitions of the willing or by alliances has widened as much as the increasing number of risks and challenges raised by the asymmetrical threats described by authoritative figures in the field of national and international security. Consequently, swift and flexible strategies for mitigating these are required. In this respect, this article argues that the hard power is no longer enough to uphold the formulation and the application of such strategies. Therefore, an all inclusive approach is mandatory and the direction suggested by this paper is that of integrating the skills and competences of the soft power into the overall framework needed to conduct such operations. However, a number of difficulties are envisaged since the very term of “soft” power is an elusive one due to its dependence on the development and use of a set of skills underlying not only on the national/community/military cultural values of the participants to such operations, but also on the values of the inhabitants of the areas where such operations unfold. As a result, the question raised by this article is to what extent the intercultural experience acquired in military operations can be a passage to understanding oneself and, as a result, the other (that can be defined both as the co-worker from the same unit, the co-worker(s) from the same military operation/exercise, the military organization as an evolving body of knowledge requiring sharing and contributing to the overall knowledge pool, or the very civilian involved through its very presence in the area of operations/at the very core of a mission’s end state). Based on the answer to this question, the article will then look at the feasibility of developing a prospective model for institutionalizing the lessons learned in the intercultural field as a result of a country’s military’s participation into international missions. Last but not the least, the conclusions will highlight that the intercultural encounter should not be solely a matter of individual and group experience that is passed along in the “word-of-mouth” fashion. Therefore, for this to become an integral part of the policies and strategies yielded by the dynamism of the national and international security environment, a model for recording and institutionalizing such an experience is needed..*

**Keywords:** *intercultural, military operations, soft power, lessons learned, institutionalization model, security, skills, (meta) competences*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The article argues the need for the Romanian military to establish a system and process of lessons learned in the intercultural field based on the experience already gained in the unfolded/unfolding multinational military operations. In this respect, I would like to underline that, in accordance with the conclusions of the research I conducted as part of my doctoral degree between 2008-2011 and that was focused on identifying the need and feasibility of integrating the intercultural

aspects into the management of the Romanian military human resource involved in multinational military operations such a system is already described both at NATO and Romanian level at the level of formal documents. However, what I want to emphasize is that making this system work, and more particularly, adapting it to the intercultural field requires a well-defined theoretical framework, a good understanding of both the advantages and the limitations of such a system in general, and of a system focused on institutionalizing the intercultural

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experience, in particular, and last but not the least on modeling this experience into an understandable and usable piece of knowledge for both the individual, the group(s) the latter is part of, and for the military organization as a whole. Consequently, this paper will look at the extent to which the intercultural experience can be truly transferred from an individual, strictly experiential level, to a formal group/organizational level. Moreover, it will briefly provide a tentative taxonomy of lessons learned in the intercultural field and, in the end, based on the latter, it will present a model based on which the lessons learned in the intercultural field can be passed on into the collective consciousness of the military organization.

### **2. THE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE: A PASSAGE TO I(NDIA)**

The elaboration and use of lessons learned in the intercultural field as a result of the military missions undertaken by the alliances/coalitions of the willing Romania has already been part of through its military representatives can not only yield advantages in terms of the better training and education of the human resource to be deployed in theatres of operation or on missions of various nature, but is also prone to a number of disadvantages.

One of the major advantages that a system and process destined for recording lessons learned in the intercultural field is rendered by the unimpeded access of any defense establishment to the intellectual capital of its employees. In this respect, it is noteworthy that a system of lessons learned, in general, and one of lessons learned in the intercultural field, in particular, must not be viewed as mere formality, but as an effective means of improving both individual and group efficiency. Only by meeting this prerequisite, do employees have the chance of developing a set of metacompetences such as the ability to correctly assess one's own experience and performance in an intercultural environment through the lens of advanced knowledge of colleagues' needs and requirements, of work groups' and an establishment's characteristics

and peculiarities, as well as the capacity to identify and build upon the experiences relevant for an organization as a whole. Thus, it is only the development of such competences that can actually pragmatically uphold and substantiate the discussion on managing the human resource in accordance with principles of modern management like employee empowerment and tasks delegation. Moreover the very concept of intellectual capital is substantiated by the continuous and constant influx of useful and pertinent knowledge transferrable into behavior through social learning. Consequently, a well defined framework for the collection, elaboration and dissemination of good practices, as well as of the most efficient means of solving various issues at individual, group and establishment level is one of the first steps towards the basic desideratum of any learning organization, namely the gathering, dissemination and use of knowledge for the common good. From this point of view, provided that the system and process of lessons learned are adequately implemented, they can play a major role in the indirect motivation of the employees. In this respect it is worth noting that the possibility of reflecting on one's own critical and relevant experience and of sharing it at system level by transforming it into a guide for the other employees renders not only a feeling of belonging to that establishment, but also of every individual's importance.

A well-defined system of lessons learned in the intercultural field at the level of the Romanian military would also be advantageous in terms of the improvements brought to the educational curricula in accordance with the commitments made by the Romanian Ministry of National Defense to its NATO and EU partners and, inherently, to its main stakeholder, that is the civil population. From this point of view, these very commitments make the transfer of the knowledge gained by the military in the broad spectrum of military operations characteristic of the contemporary environment a national priority. Thus, the argument according to which the existence of training programs in the intercultural, multicultural, multilingual fields

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at the level of the United Nations or at the level of other coalitions of alliances renders their development unnecessary at national level is not a consistent one as long as the number of individuals who can benefit the latter is a narrow one, compared to the need to train and educate not only the cadets, but also to update the personnel in various positions on the latest developments in the field of interest. Consequently, establishing a system of lessons learned in the intercultural field at national level can contribute to the development of programs aimed at but not restricted to the following: the transfer of the knowledge gained and of the competences developed by the personnel that has already been involved in military operations into formal training programs for those who are to be deployed/trained to be deployed in no time by developing general models that can be afterwards adapted to the needs of each particular group/unit; the establishment, maintenance and use of a database of the personnel that has already been part of missions abroad, and more specifically, of their propositions to the after mission suggestions so that the really valuable ideas and input can be easily transferred into action; the development of assessment systems that should not only check on an evaluation chart the participation into a military mission abroad, but also the added value of such a participation that could be measured in terms of the relevance, usefulness and practical character of the suggestions made by the participant towards the improvement of the overall management system, in general, and the intercultural approach, in particular.

One major aspect that actually is the tell tale sign of a real lesson learned is the change in behavior that occurs upon its internalization at individual level/institutionalization at organizational level. However, for an observation/lesson to become a lesson learned, an evaluation system needs to be in place in order to filter relevant from irrelevant information. The question that arises is if such an evaluation grid is one that is empirically/scientifically grounded and hence, a valid one when information is submitted to

higher echelons for decisions to be made. One answer to this interrogation is that the experience of the reporting officer is the guarantee that the information is filtered and, hence, trustworthy. However, that does not really account for the objectivity of the information and for its alignment to the needs characteristic of an overall system. Hence, the need to develop a guiding model for the assessment of experiential observations and for their transfer into lessons learned, if case may be. One possible problem that can be foreseen when it comes to developing and implementing such a model consists in the adequate understanding of the cultural variables of the military organizational culture by its very members, and hence their inclination towards understanding, identifying, analyzing and evaluating aspects of *finesse* characteristic of the culture of other organizational groups and/or peoples. Moreover, what is extremely challenging and rewarding at the same time is the gathering, transfer and integration of the tacit knowledge gained through personal interaction with other linguistic and cultural environments, as well as the transfer efficiency of a strictly personal piece of knowledge into lessons learned.

Another reason why lessons learned in the intercultural field can be of use at formal, organizational/group level is that beyond a mere conclusion and hence a principle of behavior, such lessons are based on solid, corroborated evidence and arguments that surpass the mere empirical observation. Consequently, one of the reasons for which a system of lessons learned in such a field is necessary is that it ensures the avoidance of applying a simplistic paradigm like the East-West one, and inherently of clichés that fall into the do- don'ts advises and that simply record a set of acceptable/forbidden gestures/behaviors without sufficiently explaining, nor substantiating them.

One major role of the lessons learned is that of signaling not only system/group level/individual behavioral deficiencies, but also successful behaviors. In this respect, one of the roles of the lessons learned system in the intercultural field is to identify valid

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behavioral patterns worth replicating if the context that generated the latter is similar to the one when a decision has to be made as to how better behave at cultural/linguistic level. Such a verification function of this system and of the methodology upholding it should be taken even further by applying an analysis framework built around the following measurement parameters: time length (i.e. the necessity to analyze the recorded the lessons/observation for a longer period of time); multi-focus (i.e. the need to resort to multiple perspective, make comparisons and only afterwards draw conclusions); integrated framework (i.e. a clear-cut and formally accepted operationalization of the concept of interculturality at the level of the specialists in the field). The use of such analysis parameters can be advantageous when it comes to drawing conclusions of a more general, credible, applicable nature than the intercultural framework apparently allows.

The aforementioned advantages and limitations of the lessons learned in general, and of those in the intercultural field in particular, actually underlines the discrepancy between the qualitative nature of any lesson learned and the quantitative means in use to gather and disseminate the observations and lessons that could become lessons learned. Thus, so far, the system in place at NATO level and at the level of the Romanian armed forces is actually a database organized by fields and restricting the access to the position and professional field/specialization of the officer who may upload relevant information. Besides this restrictive, quantitative and position-based approach to the system of lessons learned, another hindrance to its adequate use is rendered by the absence/insufficient dissemination of the relevant information already uploaded in the system and, hence, the failure in its institutionalization. In this respect, the NATO efforts towards delivering a course on lessons learned to staff officers is noteworthy. However, that is one attempt that does not cover the needs in the field of every nation participating into the Alliance's operations. As a result the solution that can be envisaged at

national level is the development of a set of capabilities specially designed for the adequate establishment and use of the lessons learned system and, more specifically, a capability focused on the lessons learned system in the intercultural field. However, such a capability can only be designed and built if the importance and effects of the intercultural aspects on multinational missions are fully grasped. In this respect, what is needed is a methodology that describes and regulates not only the process of gathering lessons/observations in the intercultural field, but also the elaboration, dissemination and institutionalization of lessons learned. In my opinion, such a methodology should be designed around the following questions:

- What are the criteria justifying the transformation of individual/group experiences/observations/lessons into lessons learned? (e.g. what is their impact on the perception and representation of one's own self and of the world in general, on the dichotomy good-evil, and, inherently, on overall behavior);

- What are the criteria used in selecting those lessons worth retaining and transferring into the collective organizational memory?

- What is the significance and validity of these observations/lessons for overall organizational processes?

What are the best means to collect and disseminate lessons learned given their highly subjective character?

### **3. A TENTATIVE LESSONS LEARNED TAXONOMY FOR THE INTERCULTURAL FIELD**

A taxonomy of lessons learned in the intercultural field (and not only) should be framework to be employed in the analysis and differentiation among lessons/observations. Currently, the framework employed in discussing these follows two major coordinates. One of this describes "the lessons learned from missions, activities and international military applications with Romanian involvement" and the taxonomy

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used to define it is quite generous detailing the main fields of expertise involved in the military actions and exercises: psychological support, technical-military support; CIMIC; communications; logistics; doctrines and regulations; education; sports; infantry; intelligence; training; humanitarian law; legal support; medical support; NATO; PFP; Joint; NBC; operations; personnel; simulation; environmental and labor protection; technical and metrological surveillance; public relations; visits, etc. The other coordinate focuses on the lessons learned from the theatres of operations (e.g. Irak, Afghanistan) and more specifically on: the composition of the belligerent forces; operations; lessons of other contingents participant into the theater of operations. As a result of these coordinates, the result is the lack of an integrated approach towards the intercultural field. In the end, that can only account for the necessity of the taxonomy suggested by this paper, as well as for the need to explicitly integrate the intercultural issues in a well-defined framework so that the collection, dissemination and institutionalization of intercultural lessons/observations can finally lead to relevant intercultural lessons learned. What is worth mentioning is that the category of lessons/ lessons learned for which I plead is the one that goes beyond the surface, quantifiable aspects and reaches the indepth threshold of the tacit knowledge that needs to be brought to surface through a continous monitoring of its use in specific contexts, as well as by maintaining the post-mission loop open.

The main criterion used for the taxonomy suggested in this paper is that of the type of information that is conveyed through lessons learned in the intercultural field. As a result, the framework I propose runs as a set of antinomies and is an adaptation of the taxonomy suggested by of Gannon, J., M. and Karen L. Newman (144) to classify organizational knowledge. Thus, the classification runs as follows:

- Context related lessons/general principles based lessons ;

- Tacit lessons/explicit lessons;
- Individual lessons/ collective lessons.

In the case of the “general principles based lessons” I believe they can only be formulated when the context related ones have already been identified. Moreover, for the former to be formulated, the experience underpinning them needs to be replicated and confirmed by different sources in different contexts as it is the case of the lessons identified in Bosnia Herzegovina, Irak and Afghanistan. Thus, since the Romanian troops were involved in all three theatres of operations, I believe that it is not difficult to identify general patterns related to the intercultural experience of the Romanian military. In this respect, worth reminding is that one important intercultural lesson identified in three different contexts underlines the need for the Romanian military to speak a foreign language at conversational level in order to be able to properly interact with both alliance/coalition partners and with the locals. Thus, based on the manifestation of such a need it is not farfetched to talk about a behavioral pattern that leads to future decisions in this respect and, hence to general principles based lessons. However, the question that arises concerns the way/method context-related lessons are identified and recorded and, inherently, the consequences that may have on the correct transformation of specific lessons into general principles-based ones. Moreover, worth noting is that the number of context-related lessons that can become general principles-based lessons are quite limited given the context constraints and peculiarities. For example, not all lessons identified by the Romanian military in Bosnia could be transferred and used as lessons learned in Irak or Afghanistan.

As for the “tacit lessons/explicit lessons” category, I believe this is the most important one and must be emphasized and better analyzed due to the great amount of information it may yield in terms of individual/group/organizational behavior (i.e. perceptions, attitudes) during mission unfolding. The explicit lessons can be either grasped by any individual who has an open

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attitude towards the development of metacompetences, or by sharp contrast to what is viewed as commonly accepted at individual/group/organization level. On the other hand, the tacit lessons are the ones difficult to identify and analyze since they cover experiences/attitudes/ behaviors viewed as naturally occurring, unquestionably accepted and hence difficult to describe/explain.

The "individual lessons/ collective lessons" are actually an indicator of the extent to which the individual skills/competences are integrated at group/organizational level. An example of explicit collective lessons is the one derived from the manner of applying coalition/alliance codes and procedures and their direct/visible results (e.g. performance evaluation procedures, selection methods, etc.). An example of a tacit lesson is the work group culture that is not as visible and identifiable as the lessons generated by the correct/faulty application of some formal procedures/regulations.

In conclusion, regardless of the type of lesson/lesson learned category, I would like to remind and emphasize once more the need for an integrated instrument in the intercultural field to be employed in the collection, dissemination and institutionalization of these lessons. In this respect, the model to be presented in the next chapter of this paper is a first step towards the drafting of such a tool. Moreover, as the model will show, not any piece of information is a "lesson learned" and that should be a basic working principle in approaching the analysis of lessons/observations in the intercultural field and, subsequently, as case may be, their institutionalization as lessons learned.

### 4. A MODEL FOR THE COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF LESSONS IDENTIFIED IN THE INTERCULTURAL FIELD

Based on the taxonomy previously presented, the model for the collection and analysis of lessons identified in the intercultural field should consist of four

compulsory stages. The first one requires the identification of the context-related lessons by employing instruments of analysis and evaluation that are to be built in accordance with the parameters describing the intercultural communication competence concept described in previous research papers (Codreanu: 2012, 95). The information obtained at the beginning of this first stage needs to be even more thoroughly covered by resorting to the aforementioned instrument in order to identify the tacit and explicit lessons/observations and compare them to the intercultural communication competence related performance criteria assessing an individual's/group's behavior in a given context. The ensuing results will then be filtered by resorting to two interdependent criteria: the **frequency** of the lessons' occurrence within the same context for a given period of time and their **direct/indirect impact** on overall mission accomplishment. As a result of applying the frequency and impact filters two types of information emerge: on one hand the specific ones that are relevant only at individual, contextual level and do not require any further action and, on the other hand, the ones impacting not only the individual, but also work group, the community, the organization and hence of collective value. The latter are the ones that describe the general principles-based lessons category. However, for them to be termed as such, they must first undergo the frequency and impact filtering process in order to assess their impact their on the alliance's/coalition's performance and, indirectly, on the Romanian defense establishment. Once the general principles-based lessons are identified, their transformation into lessons learned may begin by initiating their institutionalization process at macro-organizational level. In this respect, Fig. 1 displays the four stages that have already been briefly described.

Concerning the necessary actions needed for the completion of the first stage, I must emphasize that the identification of the lessons/observation characteristic of a context needs to be an integrated effort undertaken

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both prior to the mission, during its unfolding and upon its closure.

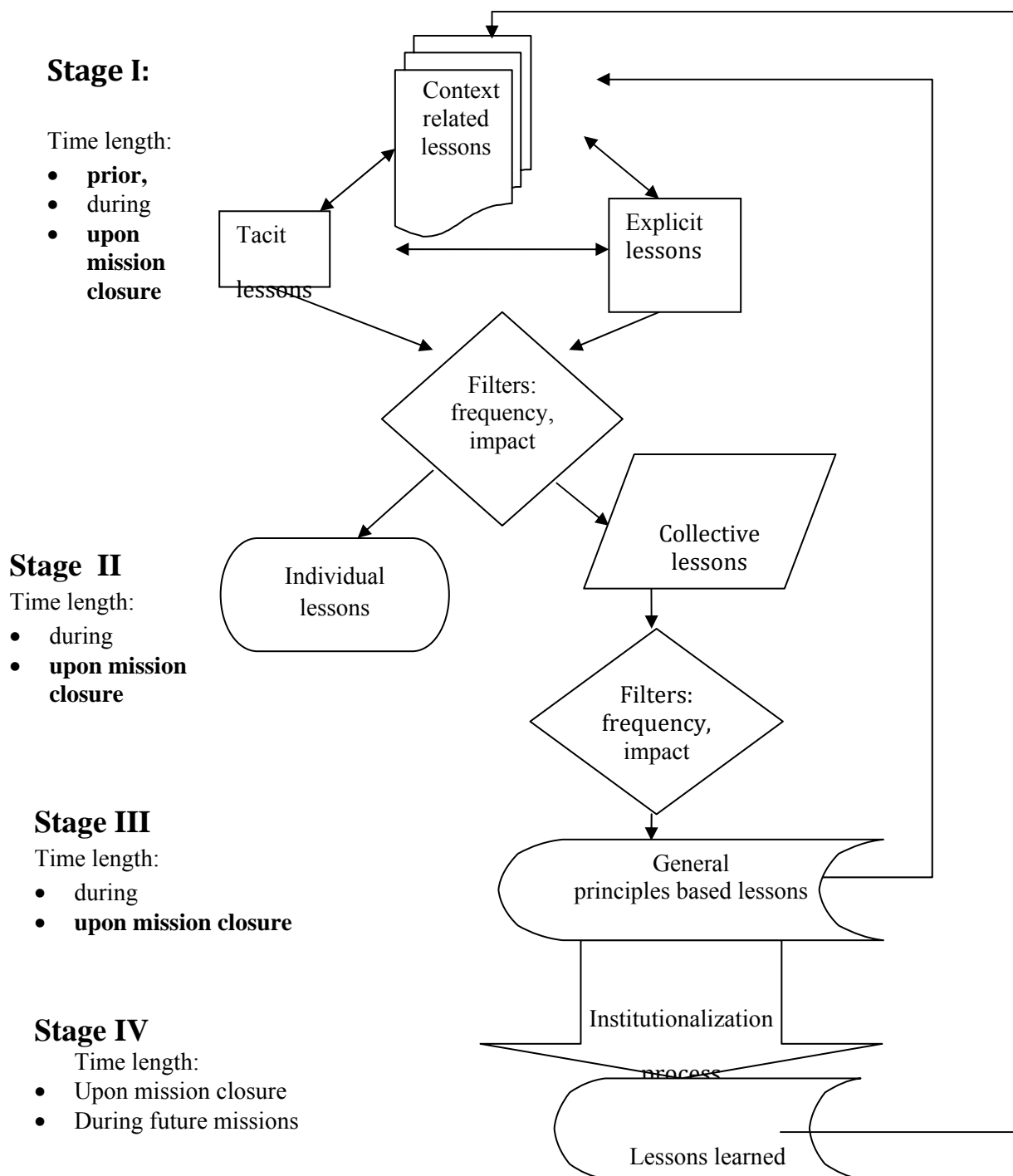


Fig. 1. The stages of transforming lessons identified into lessons learned in the intercultural field

Therefore, even though there is a tight interdependency between the context-related lessons, the tacit and the explicit ones, the moment they come into focus does not coincide. Thus, prior to the mission, the efforts must be directed towards the identification of

context-related lessons, namely towards the analysis and evaluation of the cultural aspects describing the geographical areas where the multinational mission(s) is to take place. In this respect, both the analysis and the assessment processes require the elaboration

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of a set general measurement criteria derived from the parameters describing the intercultural communication competence concept. At the same time, the assessment of the individual and/or group profile of the human resources to be deployed should be undertaken and should follow the same criteria. The observations derived from the two analyses will then lead to the identification of these differences between the mission requirements and the competence level of the participating human resource.

The novelty of this paper compared to current approaches in the field resides in the proposal it makes to integrate the set of instruments used in the assessment of the cultural environment where the mission is to take place (a process which undoubtedly is conducted during the mission preparation phase but which could also benefit from improvement initiatives), as well as in the drawing of the earmarked human resource's profile in terms of the existing and possibly needed intercultural communication competence dimensions/variables. Secondly, the paper emphasizes the idea that the same type of instruments needs to be employed in the assessment of both the context-related lessons identified prior to mission unfolding and of those general-principles based lessons derived from other similar/previous contexts. For this reason a clear-cut description of the intercultural communication competence concept is needed and in this respect the researchers in the field should unite their efforts in a project specifically aimed at the military field.

As for the tacit/explicit lessons, they can be generated during or upon mission completion and play an extremely important role in describing the collective lessons that can afterwards be assessed as general principles-based lessons and ultimately as lessons learned. However, there is a number of constraints that limit the efforts of deriving the two types of lessons for the mission completion moment and theory are as follows: the absence of a decision concerning the integration of the efforts directed towards the

generation of lessons in the intercultural filed for the Romanian defense establishment, the absence of the means through which the lessons identified/learned by those who have already been deployed can be shared/transferred to the military to be deployed (e.g. coaching, mentoring) (apart from the empirical "word-of-mouth" means); the high cost incurred by the dispatch of theoreticians in the intercultural field to the theater of operation in order to extract the necessary information and to make informed proposals; the impossibility of training a number of practitioners that could take over the instruments (i.e. structured and semi-structured interviews, as well as the observation method) from the theoreticians and apply them accordingly due to the high level of specialization required by these.

Concerning the frequency criterion employed in the analysis of the tacit and explicit lessons, it is difficult to suggest how often a lesson should be recorded before it is assessed as relevant solely at individual level or, on the contrary, at collective level. In this respect, I must underline that there is not a tight correlation between the frequency and impact criteria. Thus, even though a lesson may be reported quite often, its impact may be quite high on an individual/group. Therefore, a decision making algorithm needs to be developed. As for the transformation of collective lessons into general principles-based lessons the same observations are valid, with the addition that the impact level is of concern to not only to team/group where the lesson is recorded, but also to the overall mission of the alliance/coalition.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The process of transforming lessons/observations in the intercultural field into lessons learned is a complex and slow one involving an integrating overview at the level of the coalition/alliance to which the Romanian defense establishment contributes troops. As a result, I believe that the general principles-based lessons should be of interest



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at national level and, as far as the intercultural field is concerned, should be used as a replacement (both as a term and as a concept) for what is commonly understood as lessons learned. As for the lessons learned *per se*, the latter can be resorted to at national level upon the institutionalization of the general principles-based ones, but mostly at alliance/coalition level in order to meet the interoperability standard.

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