



Barry and Fiona with their sons, Visarl and Narin

REFLECTIONS ON LOCALISATION

Barry Higgins, along with his wife Fiona, has been a cross-cultural team member with Global Interaction in Cambodia since 2001. Barry has focused on establishing 'Peace Bridges', a local organisation working for peace within churches, families and communities. As they prepare to leave at the end of the year, Barry reflects on the process of doing himself out of a job.

For the past ten years working in Cambodia, my main obsession has been the development of Peace Bridges. After years of dreaming, planning, working by day and worrying by sleepless night, Peace Bridges is today a 'localised' Cambodian organisation. It has a national director and 15 staff passionately committed to supporting Christians and those of other faiths to deal with conflict in a way that considers the needs of all.

Our goal is to equip people with the vision, tools and support to prevent and manage conflict, based on the Christian values of mercy, justice, peace and truth.

As our family prepares to return to Sydney at the end of this year, the subject of 'localisation' is never far from my mind. Easy to talk about, harder to practice; localisation is ultimately about people from within the culture owning, sustaining and developing the vision and mission of a program.

Not long after we moved here in 2001 we were challenged by a young Christian leader, Seila, who talked of the Cambodian church being a bride, and Christ the groom. Seila suggested that foreign workers might do well to see themselves as simply a bridesmaid or best man, supporting rather than seeking to dominate the marriage.

How might the issue of localisation fit into the wedding analogy? Unfortunately I have seen many examples of localisation happening just before a foreign worker prepares to leave the field: the final stage in the mission project. We march our bride up to the altar of a foreign Christ, fully expecting that the marriage we have meticulously arranged for our bride really does fit with who she is. Yet instead of being self-critical when the marriage ends in divorce, we blame the bride for her lack of faithfulness.

For me, localisation is the tricky business of celebrating the marriage of the bride to Christ, who stands above and within all cultures, calling them to a way of transformation.

Localisation begins and ends with the transformation of people towards the values and practice of Jesus. We see this most acutely in Jesus himself. He did not call professionals for a nine-to-five, clock-in-clock-out mission. He chose unlikely women and men like Mary Magdalene and Peter. His concern was for people who knew they needed a doctor, people who were open to values of the kingdom.

For Peace Bridges, a major challenge was selecting staff and volunteers who had an openness to the values of peace building. Skills and knowledge can be developed over time, whereas the formation of values and attitudes is a much deeper conversion process.

Localisation should begin the day a project is conceived. It should be done *with* local people, not *for* them. Of course I have not always practiced what I now preach! In the early days of Peace Bridges, I stubbornly pushed the idea that we should follow the 'Western' practice of training a pool of independent mediators, so that people across Cambodia could access them when experiencing conflict. It took me almost two years to accept what my patient colleagues were saying: that this model was unsustainable in a culture where people generally seek mediation from those they know. When I finally developed mission 'with' rather than 'to' my Cambodian colleagues, our whole approach changed, to equipping and mobilising people to work in their natural circles of influence.

So how do we help build healthy, sustainable programs? I believe that we must have as a priority the development of organisational structures which support and strategically mobilise movements of changed individuals. Research, monitoring, Boards, policies, systems of governance, participatory decision making processes, programming, succession planning... These are not dirty words sent to contaminate a movement. They are essential



Barry with the Peace Bridges team



Peace Bridges counselling

to ensuring a movement can grow and develop beyond the initial catalyst of the founder.

Yet the localisation of organisational structures is a complicated business. Probably the most challenging part of the whole process is paying sufficient attention to two separate contexts: an upstream and a downstream context.

Downstream, Peace Bridges is all about working alongside individuals, communities and churches to equip them to develop very grass roots movements for peace making. Localisation is about equipping Pastor Sophat to mediate a long, bitter dispute between two key families in his church. It's about helping a community organisation in northern Cambodia develop its own mediation and counselling skills training course for village leaders and prison guards. It's about building Miss Vee's skills in training counsellors to look past stereotypes and really listen to young women trying to escape sex work and build new lives.

Downstream localisation is relatively straightforward, particularly if you are blessed with passionate, committed national staff eager to learn, as the Peace Bridges team is.

But ignore upstream localisation and projects seem to fall apart quickly. Or, maybe even worse, projects continue unchanged for years after the cross-cultural worker leaves. **Upstream localisation is about equipping national staff to continually and critically examine their ever-changing context, monitor what is working and what is not, make changes and adapt to meet new needs and challenges.** It's about ensuring local leaders have the tools to keep up with what is happening in their sector across Cambodia, the region and the world. It's about helping them feel confident when responding to the ever-shifting priorities and requests of donors: confident that what they are doing is best practice, but also confident enough to try new things.

The challenge of localisation is doing both upstream and downstream localisation well. In my experience this requires foreign workers to constantly reflect upon the roles and

responsibilities we play. **The question I've learnt to ask myself is this: if a Cambodian colleague can do this job effectively, then why am I doing it?**

For example, I really enjoyed providing peace-building training, but it wasn't long before I realised that Cambodian colleagues could do this better than me. My role quickly moved from being an upfront trainer to getting behind nationals and focusing upon coaching and supervision. No sooner was I relishing this role than I found other staff were ready to do the coaching and supervision, and my role moved further back to supporting the coaches and supervisors. With each step my role became further and further removed from the action, into the background. The final step was moving out of a leadership role altogether and developing the art of keeping my mouth shut unless invited to open it.

Whilst each of these steps was encouraging, they also involved the loss of fulfilling roles for me. Yet localisation is not about my job satisfaction – it is about developing the job satisfaction and vision of the Cambodian people who are the true owners of the mission.

It is humbling to confess that when I leave Cambodia the team members of Peace Bridges are not likely to be very concerned. There will be little gnashing of teeth. Whilst I hope I'll be missed as a friend, I will not be missed as a work colleague. They have moved on and are thriving.

I've made my mistakes, yet have also seen lots of little successes. I have done my best to set things up so Peace Bridges can have a successful future. Yet ultimately it is the Spirit of God who weaves and builds the Kingdom. With the best of intentions and plans, localisation of an organisation may flounder or fail. Organisations and programs come and go, but the real localisation that lives on is the changes in the lives of people an organisation was set up to serve.

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