Chapter XII

A short excursion to Papua New Guinea and a sense of the Stone Age: Libya and Yemen.

I had always been intrigued whenever Papua New Guinea came up in conversation. Everyone there calls it PNG. Over the years and from a professional EC standpoint I had made several submissions and submitted tenders for a work there. Always it appeared that the tender competitions were suspended or deferred for a range of unusual reasons; such as that the tender committee has been dissolved because of allegations of corruption or civil unrest or the like. Indeed, it had been put to me that in terms of a transparency scale PNG was down at the bottom, snuggling closely together with countries such as Nigeria or Pakistan. Probably as a result the country has had to endure a crippling debt burden with some 20% of Government revenues being diverted to debt repayment with not so much to show for it. A major shortcoming under the budgetary situation I encountered there is that there is very little funding available for development and for quality improvement in relation to education goods and services. The Government has even had to turn down projects proposed for education reform and literacy by both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank because they couldn’t afford to pay back the bank credits.

Yes, the country is certainly unique. The blurb I had read before departure described PNG as a democracy which was stable and which prided itself on strength in diversity. I would certainly question the extent to which the country conforms to European concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘stability’. Some 85% of the population continues to live in rural areas and maintains a subsistence-based lifestyle. Rapid growth, especially of the urban population, is creating severe overcrowding, increase in the spread of urban crime and other attendant problems. In practice I found it to be quite the most dangerous country I had visited over a fairly extensive career.

With a population of 5.2 million it is unbelievable but there are more than 700 distinct languages spoken across the territory. The population is spread across the mainland and the four major islands of PNG with different degrees of communication and transportation problems. Until recently in the interior the mainly Australian exploration and mining companies would discover new unheard of remote peoples
living basic pastoral lives with no contact to the outside world. These communities are often referred to as ‘Stone-Age’ peoples. It’s ironic to think of the Second World War raging around them in that part of the world and of their being oblivious to the mayhem all around them. At a local level there was a strong tradition of head-hunting. On more than one occasion it was indicated to me that in three generations some of these peoples had graduated from head-hunting pastoralists to helicopter pilots! Given formidable natural geographic barriers coupled to diverse cultural traditions between the Papuans living along the coast and the until recently fairly primitive lifestyles of substantial parts of the population it is sadly not surprising to find there are immense frictions generated between and within these different peoples and tribes.

My PNG counterpart on the left - most probably of Papuan origin - and local project people who appear much different from a physical make-up. They were most pleasant companions.

But yes it is rich in diversity. There is very considerable ethnic, geographical and cultural diversity. The population is divided between the Papuans, to my opinion a gentle trading people and the Guineans who are found distributed in distinct isolated pockets across the interior of the islands and the small expatriate populations of mostly Australian and Indian immigrants. The spread of the main religions is quite diverse and includes Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterian/Methodist/London Missionary Society believers, Anglicans, Evangelical Alliance adherents, Seventh-day Adventists other Protestants and indigenous believers – the latter account for 34% of the population. I’d very much like to have found out more about the practices of the indigenous believers and how they have evolved and matured and distanced themselves from head hunting and the ‘boiling pot’.

The churches were doing a fine job – I’m sure – but I detected a degree of paternalism and a belief that the long established clergy had a more profound understanding of local people's needs and aspirations than had the people themselves. During my short stay I met a Dublin priest who played a central role in the organisation of basic
education. He would be quite satisfied with any proposed EC project but at the same time he was unrelenting in attempting to influence me and in putting forward what he saw as denominational rights and the maintenance of the existing privileges enjoyed by the different faiths. He wasn't into transferring authority to school-based management unless it was on established traditional lines. One had the impression that the Ministry of Education might have its aspirations and that these aspirations - if they were ever to be implemented - needed to take into account the religious realities. It was familiar ground to me; more like Ireland had been when I was growing up in the 1960s.

On the other hand, PNG is richly endowed with natural resources, but exploitation has been hampered by the rugged terrain and the high cost of developing infrastructure. Agriculture provides a subsistence livelihood for 85% of the population. Mineral deposits, including oil, copper, and gold, account for 72% of export earnings. There are substantial illegal cross-border trade activities coming primarily from Indonesia, including ‘goods smuggling, illegal narcotics trafficking, and squatters and secessionists’.

The eastern half of the island of New Guinea – the second largest island in the world - was divided between Germany (north) and the UK (south) in 1885. The latter area was transferred to Australia in 1902, which occupied the northern portion during World War I and continued to administer the combined areas until independence in 1975. There is still acknowledged to be a degree of friction in relations between Australia and its former protectorate.

It is fair to say that the Australians with their almost 75 years in charge have something to answer for. Earlier in the Philippines I had come across stories of racism on Australian funded projects. Here the practice appeared to have gone on for much longer. There were stories about the prohibition of access for local people to the most attractive beaches until quite recent times. We were genuinely shocked by the casual abuse of the local peoples by some of the diplomats I came across. There was the occasion when after an afternoon’s discussion with an expatriate colleague we all went to a restaurant for a beer and a meal. As we left in his ‘backey’ car he opened the boot, and one of the waitresses hopped in behind. He dropped us off at our hotel, and he made it quite obvious how he intended to while away the night hours. On another occasion, we noticed an expatriate leaving a party with two young local girls and making no secret of it. It was I suppose the normal carry-on with expatriate whites. I wasn't proud to see it.

While I was there, the Australian authorities in Brisbane, I think, strip-searched the PNG Prime Minister as he entered Australia. There was huge furore in the local newspapers and considerable exception was taken by the local people I spoke to - to this somewhat cavalier treatment. Australians I met just couldn't understand the basis for the locals’ negative reactions.

It was a dangerous place for expatriates. A personal friend from Barbados, John Applebee, who I looked forward to meeting, had been murdered prior to my arrival: being thrown off the third floor of the local hotel in Port Moresby. From the beginning it was emphasised to me that I must take very special care and be very conscious of security issues and instructions. I was directed by the EC Delegate on
pain of my mission being terminated that I should order only the scarlet coloured taxicabs. I was to telephone in advance, and to ask for the taxi registration number and the driver's name. Before getting into the taxi I was to confirm these identities. Initially I thought this was an exceptional but as I remarked the two perimeter security fences around the hotel and a further presence of security between the public hotel areas and the bedrooms I duly took note and followed instructions.

Our aircraft from the outside.

Coincidently, a colleague was working on a parallel project in PNG, which overlapped with mine. Unfortunately, and quite shortly before I arrived, she had slipped in the bathroom in her hotel, had broken her ribs and - in the course of the identification of her injuries and her being attended by a physician - her wallet with cards and passport had been stolen.

It certainly is no place for girls to be on their own. I noticed several times the newspapers carried horrendous accounts of gang rapes and attacks on girls’ school dormitories. Personally I've found the people I met warm, interested and above all friendly and open. They have had throughout their lives had to put up with these fears, raise their children and feed them against a background of insecurity and random assault. I admired them very much.

Transportation across country in the absence of a road network generally is dependent on small fixed wing aircraft, which daily fly across the difficult and often stormy terrain. My Terms of Reference noted that “whilst key departments and stakeholders are generally located in Port Moresby, some travel to provinces may be required. It
should be noted that no road links exist between the capital and the provincial towns, and all internal travel outside the capital will be by air”. I suppose a picture most people have of PNG is one of beautiful islands and of being transported across them in small heroic aeroplanes which are maintained and refuelled on a variety of primitive air strips. It’s not that far from the reality but possibly doesn’t take into account all the eventualities.

My mission team setting out for Lae to the north of Port Moresby

Through my career I suppose I have made more than 100 missions for the European Commission. The mission to PNG was distinct from the normal bureaucratic run of the mill appointments. In the first place I was approached by an EC official rather than having to apply to be considered for the appointment. I was approached by a lady to whom I had reported on numerous Pakistani and Nepalese missions. In telephoning me to enquire as to my willingness to go she said that this would be a short mission and that in highlighting my candidature she had convinced her colleagues regarding a sense of discretion, which I could be expected to bring to the mission. Perhaps, in retrospect I should have been more wary. Looking back, it's clear that my involvement was to be a rubber-stamping exercise to protect the EC Delegation from criticism in making a decision to select a project which had been proposed.

The purpose of my mission was as an outsider to carry out a short review and revision where necessary of a proposed €39 million Feasibility Study for Education, Training

70 I was travelling seated between two female colleagues in this plane. Unfortunately we had to travel through a storm and the aircraft pitched and bucked in all directions. We were all terrified but my arms wore the bruises of the ladies grasps as we plunged with them screaming hither and thither.
and Human Resources Programme and the programme components proposed for PNG in response to quality issues raised by the relevant Brussels Directorates. These had been referred back for further consideration. The Feasibility Study in question had cost of the order of €500,000 and had taken some six months to complete.

Anyway, I came, I asked a number of questions, and I visited a limited number of important locations. I met the vested interest groups, from the Ministry, the donor stakeholders especially the Australians, and the representatives of the various churches. In the short time available, I prepared a fairly trenchant report, which I'm still proud of. I've never been paid for the exercise because of the fundamental disagreement which developed between me and the Delegation on what the priorities for a project of that magnitude might or should be.

Glancing through my computer project files I see I was to start in March 2005 with a draft Final Report submitted by Day 25 (calendar days) after the commencement of the mission. The task established for me was tight and was summarised as:

2 days: Mission to Brussels for briefing;
2 days: Travelling to PNG;
2 days: Inception meetings with National Department of Education, NAO, EC-Delegation, other stakeholders in Port Moresby;
12 days: Interviews; Stakeholder debriefing on day twelve;
2 days: Travel back to Europe;
5 days: Drafting of a Financing Proposal and the mission report.

“On arrival in Port Moresby, the expert will be thoroughly familiar with the 9th EDF Feasibility Study for the Education, Training and Human Resources Development Programme, the draft Financing Proposal, the views of AIDCO/C and will:
Review with the key departments and stakeholders the TOR and Plan of Work;
Agree on the methodology of the review, in terms of the level of participation vis-à-vis management of the process, data collection, data analysis, drawing conclusions/ supplying recommendations and giving reactions to draft conclusions. “

The short duration of the itinerary and the briefing, the requirement for gathering feedback and the preparation of a Financing Proposal and a mission report including international and local travel with accompanying jetlag was totally unrealistic and I should have known it. I confess on the other hand having heard so much about PNG I was anxious to capitalise on the opportunity of a short mission.

From the beginning when I read the TORs for the mission I had concerns about the effectiveness of the study for an earlier EC funded education project prepared several years previously and of its relevance. At the initial briefing in Brussels the notes I took focused on the fact that the original Financing Proposal had not been accepted by Brussels - and hence my mission. Another issue was that there were serious doubts expressed on whether an amount of €39 million earmarked in the financial envelope could be absorbed and/or and given the reputation for absence of transparency - adequately accounted for over the project period.

On the other hand, I encountered valid and trenchant criticisms from local PNG officials of the “patchwork” nature of projects like the one proposed; the absence of cohesion; the fact that adjoining projects took different approaches, the need for a
A unified policy perspective and the like. One planning officer criticized the negative results experienced in a recent project providing textbooks – and for which I recollect €10 million had been allocated – and wasted. I was truly amazed when I read in one of the Feasibility Study Annexes that the World Bank project had experienced serious issues of corruption regarding textbooks and withdrawn from the project. How then could the Formulation Study incorporate such a proposal?

I worked all hours and in the time available outlined a radical departure from the Feasibility Study and proposed instead that EC funding should support the technical and vocational education sub-sector as the second top priority in the PNG’s own National Education Plan. I further suggested EC support would also fund the cross-cutting areas of activities contributing to containment of HIV/AIDS and for implementation of the Gender Equity in Education Policy of the National Department of Education. I considered the alternative proposal I prepared offered the opportunity for the EC through its support to have an influence on policy development for the whole TVET sub-sector. I felt this would be an improvement on the present situation, where all aspects of formal education are dominated by AusAID.

This was a battle I fought long ago. I just give a flavour of the arguments put forward. My criticisms and advocacy of an alternative approach wasn’t very much welcomed by a Delegation which I’m convinced had planned for and expected a rubber-stamping exercise of the earlier proposal. They were instead left with a professional report which explicitly criticised the earlier proposal. I smiled to think they would have to go back and explain themselves further and justify their decision.
to Brussels. While I could sympathise with their dilemma I was firmly convinced that the radical alternative I was proposing was along the right lines.

This was one of the instances over a long career when my professional conviction stood up to the pressure of the client institutions. I like to think that on occasion I did stand on principle when I hear consultants being criticised as mere scribes who propose what the client wants to do anyway. The Delegation refused to reimburse me my fees. They did pay my travel and subsistence costs.

Ironically and later by another coincidence an EC official, with whom I had worked extensively in Cambodia was appointed as the new Delegate. He requested I should go out and evaluate the project then under implementation. I still feel my course of action in politely declining his invitation was the correct one.

**Yemen**

Yemen is one of the oldest centres of civilization in the Near East. It occupies the southwestern to southern end of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the only state in the Arabian Peninsula to have a purely republican form of government. Yemen was the first country in the peninsula to grant women the right to vote\(^1\). Yemeni unification took place as recently as 22 May 1990, when North Yemen was united with South Yemen, forming the Republic of Yemen. The majority of Yemen's population live in rural or tribal areas, and it is one of the least developed countries in the world. Throughout its modern history the country has undergone a long period of conflicts and civil wars, the last being the 2011 Yemeni uprising.

I went to Yemen late in 2005. Initially, I had some hesitation in going on a mission there. Earlier there had been very bitter civil war between North Yemen and South Yemen. I had heard many stories concerning the Al Qaeda rebels operating in the country. Osama bin Laden’s vast extended family originates in Yemen and there are still considerable numbers of the family resident there. On my arrival, and notwithstanding the ban on alcohol and other bans such as the bar on women entering into selected coffee shops I came to respect some - certainly not all - of these all-Arab traditions and to enjoy my time in that wonderful world heritage city of Sana’a. Any hesitations I had were soon forgotten.

I was down in Yemen for a couple of weeks to work on the preparation of a national workshop entitled “Towards the development of a Medium Term Results Framework for Basic Education”. The workshop highlighted the need to take a hard look at the basic education system and to see where change and flexibility might be introduced in line with implementing the modernisation agenda set out under the Government’s Basic Education Development Strategy.

The workshop, which was sponsored by GTZ the German Development Agency and our paymasters, took place in the National Public Administration Centre in Sana’a from December 4\(^{th}\) to 8\(^{th}\), 2005. I made a short visit again when I was based in Cairo to make a presentation on our capacity as a consulting firm to the World Bank.

\(^1\) Wickipedia
The modernisation process underway in Yemen is aimed to address the high rate of population growth forecast, the very high illiteracy and the very low enrolment rates, especially of females residing in rural areas - coupled with a high proportion of out-of-school children. Current and forecast GDP growth levels were pegged around the expected levels of population increase – but the expectation even then was that the Government would find it difficult to respond significantly to the social demands of a rapidly expanding population.

All developing countries face considerable challenges of poverty. Women in them experience deeper levels of poverty, tending to be confined to domestic and subsistence roles and experiencing heavy and increasing workloads. A recent study\(^{72}\) notes that Yemen has the starkest gender disparities (among the highest in the world) in terms of enrolment ratios, adult literacy rates and primary completion rates.

Girls’ education was seen in the context of a medium-term strategy to reduce population increase. I found this to be somewhat ironic. It was acknowledged in assessing the need for increased girls’ enrolment that cognisance has to be taken of Yemen’s current situation especially in relation to the idea of women at work or the concept of girls’ education generally.

I was quite taken aback by the then current awful situation in relation to key demographic and economic indicators which were being targeted by the modernisation process. Main issues were the high rate of population growth forecast and its expected impact on the already low levels of service supply, very high

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\(^{72}\)Integrating Gender into EFA Fast Track Initiative Processes and National Education Plans: A study by Amanda Seel and David Clarke: (Final Draft) June 2005
illiteracy and the very low enrolment rates, especially of females residing in rural areas and the high proportion of out-of-school children.

The situation in 2004 was that there was a shortage of female teachers in rural areas and measures to increase girls’ enrolment would have to address this issue. There was a need to consider the high student/teacher ratios and the need for teacher redeployment if adequate internal efficiencies were to be achieved.

The then current forecast of population growth was expected to be in excess of 50%, by 2021. This was just another instance of enormous population growth taking place in countries of the developing world. A serious implication of the current high levels of growth was the heavy pressure it exerts on the limited resources of the nation to provide adequate social services including basic education services - even for maintaining existing levels of service. Later these levels of population increase have to have consequences for the Western World with its aging population and need for youthful workers. There appears to be the inevitability of a collision course between our reducing Western population growth rates and the impact of young immigrant populations from burgeoning countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan or Yemen.

In recommending activities to be undertaken by the Ministry that aimed to increase enrolment of girls there were a limited number of key areas where progress in drawing up and consolidating the planning process was required. These activities would be tied to the initiation of pilot projects aimed at achieving modest increases over larger areas of a district and the evaluation of results before a decision was reached on going to a greater scale of effort. The idea was - that initially and starting from a low baseline - to adopt strategies to encourage the government to build up capacity in pace with the ability of the system to improve. In a very traditionalist society the government was somewhat jittery at the risk of going forward too fast.
the same time with the current levels of population increase it knew it had few other options. I would like to think that if I were to revisit the country that there would be some improvement on these basic indicators. I hope so - but based on the government responses I have to fear any progress made may well be both small and slow.

Yemen: Sana’a school. Notice the three adults deeply engaged in chewing Kat.

On arriving at the Ministry initially I was introduced to a young intense but fairly withdrawn official. Over the course of the workshop I noticed he let everyone have their say. He hardly interfered. In contrast on the last day he reviewed the proceedings. He was critical of some points I had made – which was fair. Then he summarised the impact of the workshop findings on the ongoing government policy. Everyone was quiet and listened intently to what he said. He then thanked me and left. I suddenly knew where the power lay.

My old diplomatic friend from Pakistan and Vietnam was based in the Netherlands Embassy with responsibility on behalf of the donor organisations for education reforms. I therefore knew I had a friend and this was of great benefit. One evening she kindly invited my Dutch associate and me to her residence. We had a wonderful evening talking about old times and sharing a glass or two of wine together.

I think that my professional Dutch colleague was often uneasy as a young Western woman because of the prohibitions on ladies which must have been both unexpected, as well as intimidating. I found myself as an old man being implored on occasion by her to accompany her to places of interest or just for mundane things such as changing money in an ATM machine.
On another occasion my friend asked me for a favour. Her private secretary, a lady with a Ph.D. from the UK whose brother was a senior member of the opposition party had arranged a meeting between my friend the Dutch diplomat, the brother and his political colleagues. It would be for unheard of for a lady - even a Western lady - to be unaccompanied by a man for such a meeting. My friend as a diplomat representing the Dutch Government was very anxious to learn the opinions first-hand of the opposition parties on issues such as to the rights of girls to access education or their views on Osama bin Ladin and Al Qaeda and the like. We were accompanied to the meeting by the private secretary who was unrecognisable – at least to me - being totally covered from head to toe.

She just observed and never said a word – even to her own brother. We met in a remote area outside Sana’a, where we were received with great courtesy. On behalf of the three of us are I was asked to introduce the group and to indicate the purpose of our meeting. The questions were addressed to me and not to the ladies and all of the conversations where either briefings from my friend the diplomat to me which I then relayed to the politicians or the other way around. So as an outsider I was privy to a most memorable exchange which spanned the cultures of East and West.

We were offered several cups of tea, and in the course of a somewhat laid-back discussion we were assured by the opposition politicians that they had no sympathy or whatever with terrorism. They emphasised they were quite prepared to work with the government to ensure that the Al Qaeda movement would be suppressed and its members imprisoned. They were anxious that this message should be shared with the diplomatic community and be made known internationally. On the conclusion of the meeting we were cordially escorted back to our vehicle and allowed to depart. My two lady companions were very excited by the range of topics discussed, and I was glad to have been of some small assistance.
Another of my friend’s development colleagues, a Pakistani lady from the World Bank, railed against the combined efforts of the World Bank, the European Union and the Asian Development Bank in introducing earlier reforms to Pakistani education. In a small world I had earlier been personally involved in this work. I made a spirited defence of the donor’s efforts which might have been more effective had the federal and provincial governments been more co-operative and less corrupt. The lady had that fruity ‘convent’ accent which identified her as being well-educated and related to some or other feudal family. This would have explained her down-right right wing attitudes. In my travels I met several Pakistani ladies with similar backgrounds and dispositions working for one or other of the international agencies. Yes, it’s a small world sometimes.

I think it’s useful and a little amusing at this stage of introduction to highlight some interesting differences in culinary tastes between life in Yemen and the West. Overall, either in hotels or in supermarkets there wasn't a great deal of selection, especially of food and somewhat poor, if any, access to other than fairly primitive foods such as bread and eggs. I used to check with my Ethiopian waiter in the hotel each morning. Very graciously he would approach me and ask what were my wishes for breakfast? I would reply that I should like something awkward such as chicken and some fish. He would nod his head solemnly and then giggle and say with great regret “Sir, today like yesterday and tomorrow - it must be eggs. Will it be hard-boiled or omelette?” I confess I enjoyed this little dialogue - even at the expense of variety.

Yemen is famous for its use of the drug Kat. Almost everyone is addicted to this weed, which was first brought over from Ethiopia. There the shepherds noticed that the sheep became high when they grazed on it. They soon identified markets for it and since about the 14th century Kat is everywhere used in Yemen. Huge areas of agricultural land are needed to grow the drug crop. Work stops everywhere in the cities at two in the afternoon and then especially the men can be seen going off home with their packets of weed in plastic bags. It is not restricted to men. You’ll see children chewing it. Women are said to use it together and separately from the men. On top of many of the prestigious residences and buildings you will see a room which is open to the four sides and this is where the prominent men and their colleagues will sit together and talk and talk and chew the drug.

Work will normally re-commences late in the afternoon or early evening between say six and seven. Once I sat beside a government minister tasked with inviting investment into Yemen and who despaired at the image that Yemen had throughout the Arab world and amongst its own expatriate populations for the very high levels of inactivity and non-productivity due to the all-pervasive habit of chewing Kat. I was advised it is a cause of great domestic unhappiness. Men will spend a significant proportion of their wages to ensure a steady supply of the drug.

On the other hand I enjoyed working with the elder-statesman of the mission, a German expert. I was impressed one afternoon when I suggested we should meet to have a discussion on a particular issue. He agreed the issue was important but at the same time insisted there was no way his personal siesta was going to be interrupted for work. He obviously had adapted well to his surroundings and traditions.
I’d like now to say a few words about Sana’a, the ancient historical capital of Yemen. The city unfortunately is off most tourist itineraries. It is situated on a plateau at over 2,500 metres above sea level. The great plus of its location is that being at such a height you have a temperature throughout the year which rarely, if ever, exceeds 30C. It’s one of the oldest cities in the world. The old fortified city of Sana’a has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years, and contains a wealth of intact architectural gems. It was declared a World Heritage City by the United Nations in 1986.

While I was there I could see efforts are underway to preserve some of the oldest buildings, several of which are over 400 years old. Surrounded by ancient clay walls which stand 6–9 metres (20–30 ft) high, the old city is said to contain over 100 mosques, 12 hammams (baths) and 6,500 houses. Many of the houses resemble ancient skyscrapers, reaching several stories high and topped with flat roofs. They are decorated with elaborate friezes and intricately carved frames and stained glass windows. They reminded me to those who know it of the fortified town houses in Dalkey, County Dublin, but were much higher and on a grander scale.

I stayed in one such which has been converted into a guesthouse. At each floor there was a courtyard with bushes and foliage to blot out the sun. None of the floors were level all through. There were lots of up and down stairs even on the same level. There were no lifts but it had a huge atmosphere.

One of the most popular attractions is Suq al-Milh (Salt Market), where it is possible to buy not only salt but bread, spices, raisins, cotton, copper, pottery, silverware, antiques (both fake and real) and, formerly, slaves. The majestic seventh century Jami’ al-Kabir (Great Mosque) is one of the oldest in the Muslim world. The Bāb al-
Yaman (Yemen Gate) is an iconized entry point through the city walls and is said to be over 700 years old. I walked along the old narrow streets with high houses on each side and giving way to the locals passing astride their donkeys. My Dutch colleague and I were offered chai in an open courtyard by the tea merchant serving behind his brazier and we were duly inspected by all the tea drinkers. We received smiles and in no way were we interfered with.

In 2007 as noted earlier I again visited Sana’a at the invitation of the World Bank to make a preliminary presentation in relation to a future project. There was great confusion. I was introduced as the project architect proposed. I certainly wasn’t. However that didn’t stop me make an ad lib presentation on school designs and answering questions. I was received kindly. Several in the audience recognised me from the previous workshop. My friend Mohammad Ragheb from Egypt did a great job translating and improvising. Afterwards, we laughed a lot about it. I was also conscious that we had rescued that Pakistani World Bank lady from a serious loss of face had we not been able to think and speak so glibly on our feet.

I would have no hesitation in going back to Sana’a. In the lower altitudes of the country climate would be important. But overall in recent years the situation in these regions has become much less politically stable.

As I write these lines I’m reminded of my late mother who so often complained “Liam, why do you always have to go to places where there’s trouble?”. May she rest in peace.
Since writing these lines Yemen and Sana’a in particular has been involved in the mass demonstrations seeking greater democracy which has been a feature of the ‘Arab Spring’ during early 2011 and which has impacted spontaneously on so many conservative Arab nations. Yemen has a long way to go before life there can equate with Western concepts of egalitarianism. But I hope that having made its sacrifices in the blood of its people and the departure of its traditional autocratic president and his ilk a better life may come to this beautiful but impoverished nation and its wonderful people.

Pre-revolution Libya

The State of Libya is a country in the Maghreb region of North Africa bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Egypt to the east, Sudan to the southeast, Chad and Niger to the south, and Algeria and Tunisia to the west. The three traditional parts of the country are Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica. With an area of almost 1.8 million square km (700,000 sq mi), Libya is the 17th largest country in the world.

The largest city and capital, Tripoli, is home to 1.7 million of Libya's 6.4 million people. In 2009 Libya had the highest HDI in Africa and the fifth highest GDP (PPP) per capita in Africa. Libya has the 10th-largest proven oil reserves of any country in
the world and the 17th-highest petroleum production. This it might be suggested explains much of its recent turbulent history.

A civil war and NATO-led military intervention in 2011 a couple of years after my visit resulted in the ousting and death of the country’s former leader, Muammar Gaddafi, and the collapse of his 42-year “First of September 'Al Fatah' Revolution” and 34-year-old Jamahiriya state. As a result, the country is currently undergoing political reconstruction. Current reports (2014) indicate a degree of mayhem across the country as various warlords fight it out amongst themselves - under the eyes of the highly interested and most definitely behind-the-scenes involvement of elements of the international oil industry.

For the last decades of the past century Libya had been a country ostracised in the West. Memories were still fresh in relation to the Lockerbie bombing of a passenger plane. Sometime ago under President Clinton, the United States bombed Col Ghaddafi’s residence in Tripoli. But Libya continues to have immense reserves of oil. This I would suppose allows Western criticisms and associated memories to lapse.

About a decade ago things appeared different. Col. Ghadaffi was successful in repairing the shortcomings which had led Libya to be on the list of international outcasts. Two saboteurs were duly delivered to the International Court at The Hague and stood trial for the bombing. Ghadaffi gave up all nuclear materials he had used to make his bombs along with a list of those who had provided them especially Dr. Khan, whose house I had often passed when I lived in Islamabad. They passed over details of their IRA contacts they had supplied with explosives. But gradually, over the intervening time Col. Ghadaffi and his regime were seen to have moved closer to dialogue and some form of rehabilitation with the West.

Libya is an immense country and strategically located between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. In late 2006 and early 2007 I went on two missions to Tripoli in Libya. We had been approached by an equipment supplier, who was implementing a multi-million euro provision of training equipment to the Ministry of Labour. He had seen that in order to expand his contracts it would be advantageous for him to propose a team of experts to examine the situation and to report to the Ministry on possible reforms relating to its eighty eight training institutions.

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74 Again Wikipedia
75 This attempt at reapproachment with the West came to an end with the turmoil of the Arab Spring. In August 2011 Tripoli was liberated by the rebels and Colonel Ghaddafi’s 42 years of dictatorship came to an end. During 2011 I followed the Libyan War with fascination coupled with sadness. So many of the towns we visited have undergone siege and counter siege with a huge loss of life.

76 With reference to the map below: the mission concentrated on a small part of the North-West and was based in Tripoli. We travelled west to the vicinity of Zuwarah, close to the Tunisian border; east to Misratha and south into the mountain areas.
Then the Western-imposed sanctions had been largely lifted and Western and Chinese petroleum firms vied with each other for a local oil contracts off the Libyan coast. The Libyans have developed considerable expertise in playing these groups off each other and in extracting substantial concessions. This has all changed. In 2011 the country was the target of a Western NATO-backed social and political revolution which ousted the entrenched Ghaddafi clan and its hangers on. In this it had been just one other Arab country affected by the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011.

The entrepreneur himself was a most unusual individual, with only a small formal education but with a clear eye for where the deals were to be done. In a few short years he had expanded his firm and business to be involved in a number of developing countries. Of Indonesian origin, he had charm along with a capacity to move easily in any form of company. As well as us he had managed to involve the Dutch National Training Organisation, and the Dutch National Curriculum Development Organisation - both of which report to the Dutch Government. I was both curious and interested and I suppose flattered to be invited to join the consortium as team leader.

As I and my colleagues sat together in the passenger area of Rome Airport on the journey out the first time we debated whether we should risk buying some duty-free liquor to bring in with us and whether we should have a meal before boarding the Alitalia plane for Tripoli. We bought the liquor which was subsequently confiscated by the Libyan authorities without a comment. Instead of an expected meal on the flight we were somewhat dismayed and a little confused to be presented with an Italian ice cream cone!

I found Libya to be something of a paradox. It's a Mediterranean country and in addition to a hot climate shares characteristics with southern Italy or Greece. People come out to talk and to parade along the seafront promenade in the evenings with their children. Very few of any of the women seen around Tripoli wore the burca or were covered up but that changed as we journeyed into the interior. On the other hand, we were booked in to a central hotel. Immediately on arrival we were instructed to leave as the rooms had been transferred on short notice to the President of the Philippines.

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77 This wasn’t altogether by chance. The Dutch Government had just signed a long-term agreement on energy security with the Libyans.
and her entourage. It was just one of several examples I found as being outside of the usual norms of hospitality encountered elsewhere. In contrast I found the people I met to be warm and interesting, especially away from the Ministry officials and the political hierarchy.

Somewhere, I’m not sure where, I was in discussion with a native of one of these oil producing countries. I always recall the emphatic way he spoke of oil as not being a blessing – but rather of constituting a curse to any country and its prospects for equitable development. I think this is especially true of Libya. It is ruled by clever men but by men who appear to have a small sense of ‘community’ or ‘nation’ – or indeed morality. I sorely hope that the new Libya can lay down the basis for sustainable and equitable development following the recent revolution and before the oil runs out. I was surprised to learn that the Ghadaffi government had forced wage levels down even though Libya had a thriving, oil-based economy. The reason for doing this according to several Libyans I spoke to was to enable him to be in a position to finance his macro-political ambitions, where he aspired to become the first President of a United States of Africa.

At the same time it was very obvious that Libya was governed as a one-party state. Many people appeared to be appointed well above their capacities. Others carried an authority out of scale to the services provided. I found it strange when reporting to the Ministry that I was required to report to several separate factions who sometimes appeared to be in competition with each other. One faction was headed by the Minister and his backers; the other was headed by the Secretary-General of the Ministry and his backers. Both of these factions were certainly on the take. To impress us with the respective levels of their authority they each allowed us the opportunity to see some but only a very limited number – nine out of the eighty eight institutions – they proposed to reform.

The Secretary-General, independently of the mission and its travelling arrangements had called down his brother from Antwerp to be with us as a facilitator/manager. Incidentally, this man did put his hand in his pocket and took us out for expensive meals. But between them they placed restrictions on where and when we could travel. It was a little strange given that they had sought professional advice on institution development and the team having arrived they put fairly substantial constraints in our way.

The situation regarding prevalence of low wages was not to say that the population I encountered was impoverished. Quite on the contrary I was given to understand that the unemployed population can either: (a) draw an unemployed allowance from the Government; (b) Can borrow from the Government to start up his/her own business – the amount borrowed will depend on the indicative business plan; and, (c) They can present themselves for training. The unemployed are offered places on short training courses. However the unemployed must first be registered with the Ministry of Manpower in Tripoli. This is done through the local People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Afterwards, Tripoli assigns them to particular institutions.

The UN Index, which ranks standard of living, social security, health care and other factors for development, sees Libya at the top of all the African countries. Libya boasts the lowest rate of illiteracy in the Arab world. The UN finds the Plans unveiled
by the Government to be impressive and these include developing ICT in Libya as a technological hub. The Plans place a heavy emphasis on educational and TVET development.

However there is still a huge dependence on imported skilled foreign labour, mainly from other Arab countries. Whilst there is a qualified workforce - Libyans with degrees - there is little or no indigenous skilled labour force. Despite the high literacy levels and enrolment ratios, the Libyan education system is not providing the skills required to drive the economy forward. The lack of well qualified and trained teachers, equipped with the necessary technical and IT skills required for building a generation of students qualified with the competitive tools of the 21st century is hindering development. In addition to that and as already noted, there was a great deal of apathy among teachers due to their low salaries.

English has now been officially declared the second language of Libya. Demand for English language is high and increasing. Indeed all the institutes visited placed a high emphasis on foreign language learning. All were equipped with learning laboratories - at least two per institute – and these provide language support for all students taking in-centre courses. Whilst the oil and gas sector has made the most progress in this form of training, it still has a long way to go. With a steady growth in the importance of other sectors such as tourism, construction and telecommunications and more interest shown from the outside world, there should have been a considerable need for basic training related to these emerging markets. Integration into the global economy and a new approach to engaging with the West irrespective of who rules the country means that Libya has to greatly improve its educational and TVET systems.

In 2004, the total number of students distributed over 345 intermediate vocational schools was 59,318. These we learned were taught and trained by 10,030 teachers or on a ratio of about 6:1 which has to be unsustainable. Moreover, the challenges of poor infrastructure in remoter areas and lack of skilled and IT equipped teachers is a great impediment to the reform process.
There were of the order of 860,000 civil servants employed by the state to serve a population of approximately 5.6 million people. Again this doesn’t seem to be sustainable. The impression I had was one of a government dependent on its oil revenues and under pressure to provide occupations and work for its citizens. It certainly had a high proportion of civil servants in comparison with developed countries. Then the population includes 1.7 million students, over 270,000 of whom study at the tertiary level. In the academic year 1975/76 the number of university students was estimated to be 13,418. Today, this number has increased to more than 200,000, with an extra 70,000 enrolled in the higher technical and vocational sector. The rapid increase in the number of students in the higher education sector has been mirrored by an increase in the number of institutions of higher education.

The regime can be ambitious as well as somewhat impulsive and autocratic. In March 2000, the General People’s Committee for Education and Vocational Training was dissolved and all of its responsibilities transferred to the regional people’s committees of the 32 Shbiat (municipalities). Under a Government re-organisation responsibility for the management of Intermediate Training Centres was transferred from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Manpower some three years ago. With a total of 372 Intermediate Training Centres to be absorbed along-side the existing 84 Higher Institutes belonging to the Ministry of Manpower the challenge as might be imagined had been and continued to be substantial. There remained very important issues regarding finalisation of operational budget allocations, reporting lines and a satisfactory integration of the role of the Intermediate Centres with those of the Higher Institutes.

Concerning Colonel Ghadaffi himself I was told by Libyan counterparts with a certain mixture of admiration of two issues which exemplified his approach to politics. The first concerned an attractive Italian-designed Roman Catholic Church in the older part of Tripoli. The Colonel - and I suppose the local congregation - felt that this would make a considerable addition when converted to a mosque. The smaller catholic population in Tripoli was invited to give their comment but they decided not to oppose the government line. However, inviting international publicity, the Colonel decided to approach the church authorities in Rome. He made a proposal stating he would be very happy that the Roman Catholic Church should continue to retain its present, elegant church in Tripoli, but in return he felt that the Catholic authorities in Rome for their part could facilitate him in return by providing a similar elegant, ancient structure for the Moslem community to worship in – somewhere in central Rome. The church authorities in Rome never made a response.

The Colonel had not always been so supportive of the Moslem Umma or international community. My friend Mohammad Ragheb in Cairo took considerable exception to the statement made by him when he said he was African before he was Muslim. But then Mohammad had always considered Libya to be something of a basket case.

The other example was the fall-out he had with his prime minister over land the latter had chosen to develop privately in central Tripoli. Again, it was an elegant, centrally situated building. After several cabinet meetings when it had come up on the agenda and the Prime Minister was absent the Colonel insisted on a discussion with him. The Prime Minister apparently knowing the mind of the Colonel put off these discussions. Thursday evening was when the Colonel came to make his most pertinent decisions.
The Prime Minister wasn't in attendance. On the Friday morning following - the bulldozers appeared and levelled the complete site. One way to get things done!

The ‘supply-driven’ TVET establishment
It was my opinion that the TVET establishment was somewhat insulated and broadly unresponsive to market forces balanced for the short-term through adopting a ‘no problems’ and a paternalistic attitude based on the ability of the oil-rich state to absorb the graduates from the system. It was clear that the Ministry was investing substantially in its three-year Higher Diploma courses from which many graduates progress to study abroad for further qualifications.

The management team in a progressive institution visited. I was amazed by the emphasis given to the production of models of buildings – especially mosques. I couldn’t see the income generation opportunities coming from it as a training activity. Note the ubiquitous Colonel’s picture in the background.

I had a question as to whether the large numbers graduating could always be accommodated in government jobs and whether either the government service or the private sector requires a trainee to have achieved a profile of high expectations - coupled with the level of skills and attitudes acquired and the - high cost expended in achieving these outcomes?

We were surprised in terms of the balance between the public and private sectors. The public sector accounts for 95% of economic activity. This includes the petroleum and gas sector (85%), telecommunications (5%) and electrical utilities (5%). The private sector accounts for the remaining 5%. A major proportion of training providers in Libya serve the oil and gas sector. This sector is far more advanced than other sectors and has the funds to finance education, training and equipment.

Some 3,000 students go overseas each year on scholarships. I suppose such dominance by the public sector leaves everyone beholden to the government and its
institutions to a greater or lesser degree. Big Brother was certainly seen to be everywhere.

Our feasibility study

All institutes/centres covered by the mission were within a two hundred and fifty kilometre radius of the city of Tripoli. The mission was advised that the current pre-feasibility study programme being undertaken by us as the Dutch Consortium for Vocational Education and Training Improvement (DCVI) was the first of its kind to be undertaken. I thought I could see why.

The mission as noted was faced with a number of bureaucratic and logistical obstacles. There had been no pre-planning. Sometimes due to administrative reasons of whatever nature including the issue of visas for the team, coupled with logistics problems posed by the distances to be covered – most of the visits organised could not take place. Thus although it was to report on a reform process covering eighty four institutions the mission only visited nine institutes in toto; seven of which were Higher Institutes; one was a Higher Training of Trainers Institute and one was an Intermediate Institute.

In interviews with higher institute management and in walking through the lecture and workshop areas the mission was informed that a number of the institutes had received expensive new equipment for computerised courses, mechatronics workshops and even for air-conditioning and electrical courses. Management understood that further equipment would also be supplied from the central ministry. The mission saw a substantial amount of equipment unused and under wraps in the relevant workshops. It was admitted to be a problem that no training on this equipment was provided to the relevant instructors. It was pointed out strenuously to the mission that it made no sense to have this valuable equipment in place without any training being provided on it. But no one appeared to be prepared to take this waste of resources up with the central administration. I think I understood the reason for this.

It is axiomatic that it will not be possible given the limited resources in terms of expert qualifications and experience to provide a uniform level of training across the board in all districts of the country. No country can afford this. Some requirements such as those for construction skills will have priority across all or almost all the regions of the country. Regional priorities can be expected to differ as between the availability of courses and the level of specialisation. A huge programme of retraining for instructors from the various institutions especially the Intermediate Centres will be required. The concept of short courses will be new to many of the Higher Institutions although the mission witnessed short course provision in several institutions visited.

The present system might be characterised as ‘top/down’ and quite rigid allowing almost no flexibility at the local level to match the needs of the labour market. Western European experience counsels otherwise and does allow for a reasonable flexibility to focus on local needs while at the same time adhering to a national training syllabus. The UNDP Report of April 2005 notes that decentralization and support to local governance have been identified as a development priority by the national authorities and UNDP in Libya.
Patricia and I with the staff of an Intermediate Training Centre. The taller man (second left) declined to be introduced as he was an illegal immigrant and feared deportation.

There was reference made to substantial over staffing at some locations. We recommended that a census be made of all staff employed in institutes and centres throughout the system. From such data it would be possible to establish norms based on the staffing skills especially of the more efficient institutions and to have the information crosschecked with salaries paid out by the financial administration.

Since the period of ostracisation and embargos by the West I was the first Westerner with an international TVET background that the staff of the local centres had met. They were so open and anxious to discuss new developments and the constraints they were working through. I feared that decisions on provision of equipment and associated kickbacks to the central officials in Tripoli would take precedence over what was really needed at the expense of good planning, labour market research and curriculum development and could well cost the country dear in unnecessary expenditures.

I liked most of the people I encountered. I was most impressed when on one occasion the mayor of one of the municipalities invited us to his home and personally served us at his table. The exceptions were the officials at the most senior levels who were intent on carving out resources for themselves and their families and backers. In Pakistan I had earlier learnt some of the tricks relating to the supply of training equipment - so Libya and the operations of these cliques were not new to me.

I wrote an honest report and have heard nothing officially since. The conclusions and recommendations of the report I prepared were based on the discussions with the Directors and staff of the Higher Institutes covered by its itinerary. There had been considerable frustration that all decisions down to minutiae were taken at the central
Ministry in Tripoli and didn’t relate to the reality on the ground – especially the migration of internal populations from the interior to the more prosperous towns on the coast and for the crucial need for work related short courses in training. I alluded to this. In parallel and at the same time I was aware of the entrepreneur and his negotiations which ultimately became bogged down in the sand. There were two factions and even he couldn’t meet both their exorbitant demands.

There are many ancient sites to be found across Libya and treks into the amazing interior. I regret I missed an opportunity to visit Leptis Magna one of several wonderfully preserved towns of the Roman era. Maybe there will be another time and opportunity.