Chapter III

Part II: My personal impressions of the international donor agencies I worked for

I'm convinced that the promotion of education reform in support of fragile institutions following prior analysis, discussion and agreements with the beneficiary country is the approach which offers best prospects for improving the lot of peoples over the medium to longer term. It must draw upon best practice covering education and certainly agriculture and health and the realistic, practical project management models for their implementation. The key is the trust built on developing an equal partnership/relationship with the recipient country.

At the same time I'm very much aware of the resistances to education reform that I witness every day - even here in Ireland on occasion when teachers unions go on strike against changes in education policies. So the Figure below while indicative of the broad nature of support provided should not be construed as a ‘one shoe fits all’ approach to success. It’s far from it but it does posit interesting perspectives on the development process. I’m reminded of the Kathmandu Valley during my time and the reluctance indeed the downright objections of many senior educators I encountered in the Ministry to travel far outside the Valley to learn about what was going on in education.

![Support for Education in development](image)

International consultancy with the EC, the World Bank and similar institutions is quite recent. I would suggest that operating as a freelance educational consultant was largely unknown prior to the end of World War II\(^6\). Certainly much was very new to me. I had from my

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\(^6\) As a freelance consultant I worked for the European Commission, the Banks as well as several of the larger bi-lateral agencies. My work in the field would often call for close co-operation with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). These organisations play a vital role in so many areas of development. However as their titles suggest they work independently of governments. My role as consultant was different. Invariably it was based on the objectives and provisions set
previous experience inherited very little preparation regarding the professional role I was subsequently to attempt to fulfil. So much of it was new and of ‘sui generis’. In my opinion international consulting is a product of the fifties and sixties through the establishment of the respective World Bank, EuropeAid, and DfID funding arrangements. The UK historically through its interactions with its numerous colonies has played a significant role. I suppose the French and other colonial nations also contributed. At a professional level the role of the international civil engineer which had evolved during colonisation programmes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries held a considerable influence on roles, project approaches and contracts.

But in truth there were indeed few enough occupational guidelines. In my case there was a lot of learning through trial and error. At the same time I’m inclined to think it helped to be briefed at the headquarters before travelling on short mission to the country with your not always so portable or indeed reliable computer7. Then, after three weeks you left an Inception Report with the local Delegation. During the last day of the mission you presented verbally on your findings to the Minister and his senior officials and sought feedback. After that you returned home to write your report.

Working in post-conflict situations

That’s changed hugely and dramatically with conference calls, Skype and above all the email racking up substantial pressures. You’re always in touch both with the local Delegation, other donor organisations and with Headquarters. This is especially the case relating to major projects and integrated aid inputs. There’s little enough time for reflection before you present your verbal presentation and draft written report prior to departure of the team.

Reading of the impact of the western European powers in their quest to subdue, dominate and exploit less developed cultures they encountered over previous centuries doesn’t leave me with any feeling of pride. This is especially poignant and somewhat ironic when I consider that, almost uniquely amongst the Europeans, my country Ireland acted as an experimental

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7 One of my earlier computers which I purchased in the Philippines went on fire on a memorable occasion in Athens.
laboratory for the British in maintaining and enforcing colonial laws and conditions for several hundred years. My natural predisposition was to side with the beneficiary country’s needs. They in contrast would have seen me as a ‘white nose’ and one coming from a former coloniser country. I’m reminded of such potential for mutual misunderstanding in my own particular case in the context of the rhetorical question posed by Jali to Jared Diamond and as quoted in his compelling book8 Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies.

The challenge is to be able to build bridges to and to be accepted by people of different racial and religious and political persuasions. When that is achieved everything becomes possible.

I think the Figure above on working in post-conflict situations summarises the very bleak elements one can expect to find. I recall a colleague telling me once that when she worked in Rwanda she was conscious that around a meeting table there were persons who less than a year earlier had been slaughtering each other! To find a way to tap into a positive vein on which adversaries can come together after such trauma is a very personal challenge. To reach such people one has to listen, to be patient, non-judgemental and sympathetic - and above all to try to understand often that you may not reach an outcome that resolves all these issues. How could you? But in working to develop consensus on education reforms in such countries it certainly helps to have a sense of idealism and to want to help.

Then there are the often tragic impositions on vulnerable children in post-conflict situations. I’ve tried later in this account to summarise the results of an assessment of measures I witnessed being taken in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Egypt to alleviate the worst forms of child labour in those countries.

Yes, I’ve noted how fortunate my generation, or most of it, has been to avoid war. But if you contrast this situation with other countries such as Nepal, Cambodia, Eritrea, Sri Lanka or Vietnam: there life as I think Hobbes noted can be harsh, brutal and short. There people have

8 The question is: “Why is it you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?”
been very lucky to survive in post conflict situations. One example: in Eritrea under the military government it was said that for every hundred of its citizens who try to escape: it’s reckoned about fifty are successful, twenty five are shot dead attempting and the remainder are imprisoned⁹.

I suppose I should try to illustrate some main characteristics of the life of a consultant as I understood them. First of all it helps if one has a sense of adventure: an urge to discover what happens and the way people live in other parts of the globe. This modern life is all about meeting new cultures and coping in relation to other lifestyles. Mixed in with this spirit of adventure it is useful to have a sense of idealism – to wish to be of some assistance - and above all to accept that other people have equally valid arguments for choosing to live differently. Our Western mode of democracy and the lifestyles we have adopted is not a ‘one size – fits all’ model.

Then I have had my professional disappointments when expected appointments don’t take place or when I think I have worked hard to achieve a good result but the next phase of a contract was given elsewhere. I somehow realised that we consultants work internationally with governments and that politics can intervene in such cases both in terms of appointments as well as timing and over which we have little influence. This has to be a most useful learning point.

At the same time I was always aware that the fund providers expected impact and results in terms of a change to best international practice on their investments - often over an unrealistic timescale! Looking back maybe I was generally a little too sanguine about achieving success. Perhaps I was. But reforms on a nation-wide basis don’t take place overnight. It was usually

⁹ In other countries it was sadly the same: a university president in Cambodia confided to me that he owes his life to the fact he was not repatriated to his own village after the forceful evacuation of the capital, Phnom Penh. Another senior official I met confided he was forced by the Khmer Rouge authorities to kill his best friend. In Vietnam there are more of these harrowing stories and there is still Agent Orange working its way through the population.
asserted that for any kind of substantial reforms a minimum of fifteen to twenty years was required. The jury could be out on matters such as these for many, many years.

The main focus of my work has been education reform and to a lesser extent the promotion of job creation through Technical and Vocational Education projects. From the outset it is axiomatic that everyone wants better education for themselves and their children. Governments see it as a way of escaping the poverty trap. In some place – I recall in a province of Pakistan – the lady Minister for Education wanted a quiet life and felt education should be the prerogative of the middle classes. These sentiments were echoed by another Minister in Nepal. Thankfully such feelings and approaches are on the way out but they go a long way to explain deficiencies in reform processes and why conflicts occur.

Then the enormous population expansion in several countries will erode and limit the impact value on access or qualitative improvements of such donor support as becomes available. In countries with large populations significant funding is provided by donors; each providing under its discrete requirements, budget provisions and timing.

At a personal level and as a freelance consultant there is the need to have a market. Originally, I traded on my quantity surveying/building management background and on some contacts I had made while in the FAS International Department as well as in the European Commission when I went out to the ASEAN countries. Thus I was defined as a construction expert. Later I expanded this to working on programme management and budget support for education. As a consultant it was important to market myself and to add into my curriculum vitae a load of experience of new locations and the range of new tricks and approaches which the international agencies were pursuing. I wasn’t too bad at the marketing end and there was a linkage between my marketing experiences based on my time in Germany and the new career. While budgeting wasn’t too new to me either, given my earlier experiences as a quantity surveyor, but international project management was a challenge as was the development of budget support initiatives.
With my decade of experience of working for the National Training and Employment Authority in Ireland I had become sensitised to the need to promote better targeting, service delivery and accountability. Education is always one of the major spending ministries. Normally I worked at the strategic/policy level. This meant I had often to interface with the Ministry of Finance as well as the Ministries of Education or Labour. This created its own stresses as I’ve tried to explain elsewhere.

I’ve played a small role at one level or another in the creation of education and training infrastructures across several countries. I hadn’t necessarily planned to transfer across to education from vocational training and construction where I had gained a fair degree of experience. I think it may have been that I was accustomed to reporting on expenditures of large sums of money and that that necessarily brings you close to the policy and decision making areas that acted as the bridge I was to pass over. I remember poignantly that the World Bank required me to report on four thousand schools built across the Pakistani Punjab. It contrasted with the eighteen training institutions I had been involved with up to that time. I found that to be a huge departure. It wasn’t unduly demanding to step from there to a subsequent involvement in some kind or other of substantial budget support programmes.

The European Commission (EC)

Turning to happier themes the European Commission in Brussels – especially prior to the introduction of the Framework System - represented Mecca to the individual freelance consultant. Brussels was nearby. The EC is the greatest provider of grant aid to developing countries across the world. For me it provided far and away much greater opportunities than the then nascent IrishAid programme or even those national programmes of the British or Germans. While operating on the Commission’s behalf in Greece on secondment from FÁS I had begun in Brussels to plumb its mysteries and to begin to build up a network of linkages; both inside with officials as well as with outsiders. When I started it was possible to get inside and meet with individual desk officers and to promote my candidacy. I particularly liked the openness of several of the Commission officials I encountered and would continue to encounter over the remainder of my career.

Overall and coming from a country the size of Ireland I had one great asset which we only shared with the British. English is the international language of development. Exceptions may be made to a greater or lesser extent for some Franco-phone countries in Africa and for the Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries of South America – but the rest are English-speaking or English is the defined language. This applies even to China and Russia. This fact, coupled with the Commission’s demand that all documentation has to be of an excellent standard meant that all over the Commission Irish people have been in disproportionate demand in comparison to say, the Dutch with three times our population or the Greeks with twice our numbers. Were I born and raised as a monoglot Irish speaker I was going nowhere in this cosmopolitan milieu.
The mission team is visiting a provincial Vietnamese location in December 2010. The man seated to my front was our Australian-Vietnamese local expert whose family escaped after the American War. Here he is giving an extempore lecture to the less than delighted locals on aspects of project management.

With English as my mother-tongue when I first marketed myself nearly all doors appeared to be open. A perceived facility with English has ensured me the position of team leader again and again as an expected form of guarantee that reports and the like will achieve the required standard for acceptance by the Commission officials. This insistence by the Commission on a perfect level of usually English for the vast majority of projects has to discriminate against EC nationals who although technically qualified and competent in their first mother-tongue language do not have the prescribed command of English as is required. At the same time Brussels is the city of languages and I am always amazed at the mastery of English as a second language as achieved by officials and consultants I have encountered over the years. It is a humbling experience.

Earlier in my career it was largely accepted that once you were a member of the European Community of nations one had an equal right to a fonctionaire’s time. The key was to be briefed beforehand so as not to waste their time. Another asset was to establish good relations with the secretarial staff – alas now much reduced. These, usually ladies, were appointed on a two year basis after which they were required to leave. They had empathy with the consultants coming to find work. They would enable you to get past the security door into the inner sanctum after which you would choose your targets. Then, if you had something in common personally such as an interest in travelling or in boats or cars that you could refer to I imagine the functionaries looked forward warmly to your coming. That usually meant a break and a visit to the canteen for a cup of coffee.

There was and is a very human side to many of the men and women who work in the Commission. As I’ve noted somewhere earlier the worst of EC officials can at times behave as if they are Gods. Being human there were these exceptions but you quickly learned who they were and avoided them. Certainly my earlier time in FÁS helped me to understand some of the workings of this much larger bureaucracy. A very useful venue to which many
repaired especially after work on a Friday afternoon was the Kitty O’Sheas, an Irish pub situated within a stone’s throw of the Berlaymont building which was the location of DG I and DG 8, the Directorate Generals concerned with international development. Looking back at the then Berlaymont building I remember it with its rows of offices – to my mind with a strong resemblance to rabbit hutches - which accommodated the respective country desk officers.

The functionaries, as they are called, are appointed on the basis of competitive examinations which they can take up to about the age of thirty two or thirty five. Being appointed they are allocated one of the numerous Director-Generalates (DGs). Within the DG they are generalists with responsibilities for moving the project files along through feasibility, implementation and final and post evaluation phases.

The functionaries are appointed for life and given the nature of the plumb job there are very few who retire before time. They have high salaries which are almost tax-free and a number of perks such as duty-free facilities. Appointed to hardship stations they are compensated by additional holidays. At the same time their situation is institutionalised and unlike the consultants they deal with I found they are not encouraged under the system to be free to express their own opinions or to take independent action.

On the other hand the whole system is somewhat complex. In toto, in my day I think there were some twenty two Director-Generalates (DGs). Each DG had its own peculiarities. My focus was on the DGs with responsibility for development, DG I and DG VIII. To be successful it is always necessary to play by some rules. As a rule I engaged with anyone who wasn’t Irish. This was and continues to be relevant because an Irishman or any other national inside the Commission would always run the risk internally of being accused of being ‘non-communitaire’ by assisting someone of his/her own nationality instead of being open to work with someone from any other community country.

I began to learn and familiarise myself with some of the French-English terms and concepts. While Brussels is the city of translators the damage it does to any language can be immense. Nowhere do you find bowdlerisation more than with the official Commission documents. What you read in the English translation isn’t English and obviously it is not French or Spanish or another working language. Literally it is English but the sense that is being caught is often from some other faraway place. One learns to become aware of these little differences and even to enjoy some of them.

Two major departures by the Commission over the years have made it somewhat more difficult for an aspiring young expert to embark on the first step towards promoting his/her candidacy for selection by the Commission for overseas work in developing countries.

The first departure was the development of the EC Framework Contracting system. Under the framework contracting system the Commission has outsourced the recruitment of experts to competing consortia represented in most if not all of the EC countries or member states. The consortium leader is one of the major consultancies with an office usually situated near the Commission in Brussels. Sub-contracting offices representative of the respective broad areas of consultancy are hired to source experts on the open market right across the EU and latterly even from non-EU countries. Within a consortium the respective offices situated across the member states often will compete with each other as well as with the consortium leader. Competition is usually intensive.
The Commission will issue calls for long-term as well as short-term experts on behalf of the Delegation in the beneficiary country along with a specific Terms of Reference (ToRs) and the specification of the qualifications of the team leader designate and the key experts reporting to him/her. There is a short time limit ascribed to selection.

The overall duration of appointment of such consortia by the EC is usually specified as five years but given the operational complexities from a global scale and coupled with a degree of bureaucratic inertia this is often extended by a couple of years for overseas projects funded by the EU. There is, as might be expected a huge concentration on the Curricula Vitae (CVs) and on ensuring they relate closely to the ToRs. Such is the focus that it’s almost an industry in itself.

I suppose with having been involved to a considerable extent in the field while combining this with an attachment to a framework office over the years I can make a few selective comments on framework contracting from my own user point of view.

A significant feature relates to calls for long-term and short-term consultants for the field. The time limit is about four weeks ‘in toto’. Usually there is little or any notice given. In that time and following circulation of the ToRs and expert specifications to all members of a consortium there is a scramble to select relevant and especially candidates with a potential winning pedigree. Candidates will have been requested to present their CVs to the respective offices at all times and are held on substantial computerised systems by each consortium sub-contractor. These sub-contracting offices will seek to develop personal relationships or relationships of ownership with the pool of most experienced candidates.

From the expert point of view the guarantee of a good fee rate and subsequent prompt payment is naturally the topmost priority. I have noted from my relationships with various sub-contractors how badly things can go when payment for whatever reason is withheld. The world of consultants at the senior level is a small one and word soon gets around.

Each sub-office contractor submits its expert list to the main lead consortium office along with the hiring and overhead/administrative charges and following a confirmation from each consultant as to his/her availability (a signed statement of availability).

The lead consortium makes the decision in terms of the quality of experts and rates charged and effectively their decision on selection of the team of experts is final. Thus experts may be identified for a team from a variety of sub-offices as well as from the lead organisation’s own lists. This latter is an area where significant tensions often emerge; either because two sub-contracting offices may propose the same candidate or through levels of payments demanded or conflicts of loyalties of one kind or another. It can become quite untidy. This completes the first step in the selection process.

The second stage is the selection of the team proposed for the project by the Delegation based on the facts and figures and identities of the team as submitted to it by at least three consortia. Confirmation of start-up date is issued by the Delegation together with some adjustment – not much as a rule. This is circulated by the lead consultant to the relevant sub-contracting offices. These contact the experts selected and confirm availability etc.
There can be instances where an expert, usually a senior one, may have signed up for two projects and has been appointed for both with conflicting start dates. This is in spite of the EC requirement that he/she has signed up beforehand to a **Statement of Exclusivity** guaranteeing his availability if selected for a particular programme or project\(^{10}\). This is a shortcoming of the system. There is no guarantee for the aspiring expert that he/she will be successful in any competition for selection. Given these circumstances it would only be natural for him/her to try for all opportunities available. This can have dire consequences for the sub-contracting office which has proposed him/her.

The team leader has no idea as to the personalities or abilities and experiences of his/her new colleagues. Personally as an inveterate team leader I have found on occasion to have to work with a team of unknown experts to be both a demanding as well as a frustrating experience. Then to my knowledge I have never been made aware as to whether the facts contained in my CV have ever been verified by a third party; either inside the Commission. Such is the volume of experts going through the system at peak times that it would be very demanding to have such verification in place.

The team in the field reports to the Delegation. The Delegation will report to the lead organisation on performance in response to the ToRs or to unforeseen changes which can often occur. Payments can be withheld by the Delegation in the event of unacceptable reports irrelevant or wrong findings and conclusions, bad inter-personal relations with the beneficiary government and the like. Much of this can be expected given the absence of a team approach and appointment of individuals previously unknown to each other for limited periods of operation under varying degrees of stress.

The EC fonctionaire is not appointed as a subject matter expert. His/her responsibility is to administer the file. Thus in comparison with the World Bank there is the absence of professional experience coupled with development of a comprehensive institutional in-house knowledge and memory of a programme or project. This will have been addressed to some degree by the recent system of appointing consultants from outside the Commission assigning them on long-term contracts to the Delegation. In practice it usually means that the team of experts who have carried out the preliminary Identification Study may well not be appointed for the subsequent Formulation Study or for Monitoring the Programme/Project or for preparation of the Final Evaluations with the consequent loss of the experiences they have gained.

Given the scale of the consortium networks and the competition it has been my opinion from observation both at home in a sub-contracting office or in the field that the level of overhead costs incurred are high.

While it is acknowledged that applications of ‘Murphy’s law’ will surface in any situation where stress is present it is my considered personal opinion that the Framework system - as I found it to be operated - has several systemic lacunae built into its structures. To my mind it is far from perfect. However and given the complexity and scale and fast moving developmental targets involved it is difficult to envisage major reforms anyway soon emerging from the Commission itself.

\(^{10}\) I have some doubts as to whether signing this Statement of Exclusivity is legally enforceable as it only kicks in where the individual has been selected. It means he/she has to bear the risk of foregoing an opportunity and will stand to lose on an alternative application. Perhaps this has been tested in the courts. I’m unaware of any such action.
There will of course be changes arising from the application of new technologies. That is always happening and it does affect communications and especially reporting. Very many developing countries have advanced rapidly from backward communications systems to mobile phones and radio masts; largely bypassing the fixed telephone installations. This can be expected to happen in other technology spheres. But it’s far more likely that such pressure for reform as will emerge will come from the countries of the developing world which will have had their own expectations raised regarding reform processes along with the growth of greater confidence in their own abilities and the scale of their needs. It’s ironic but I expect their approaches will focus on criticism of the reform processes foisted on them as conditions of EC and the Banks and donor support and from the myriad of multilateral agencies involved in development.

**The second departure** was the more recent decentralisation of procedures for selection and management of consultants to Delegations situated in recipient countries. Personally as I suppose I was fairly well known across a range of Delegations and regions I haven’t been much affected. I remember I always got on well with the attached consultants even though one I remember remarked fairly recently that “these old men like to treat us young people as their students!”

I’m sure too that the recruitment of these young persons as external consultants in the Delegations will improve management capacity even at the price of introducing two-tiered arrangements between such consultants and the fonctionaire grade. For young professionals it is challenging and difficult to promote themselves directly as junior team members to officials charged with recruiting experts under framework contracts; a sort of chicken and egg situation.

I’m sure determined young people will find ways and means to overcome this obstacle.

Looking back I am glad I never had designs on joining the Commission. I had many friends inside who left me under no illusions as to why I must remain outside and avoid contriving to break down the doors to get in. A Greek fonctionaire broke down one morning in the canteen over a cup of coffee; blaming this “Golden Cage” for the misfortunes in his life. In almost the same breath he boasted of the properties he had acquired in Athens so I was only sympathetic to a degree. Another acquaintance recalled how he was entering his office in the Agriculture Director-Generalate in the Rue de la Loi only to witness a colleague in the act of committing suicide through leaping out the window! But for the functionaries life has mostly to do with the “ups” as I’ve described.

Several I encountered over my time had somewhat inflated egos and sense of their organisational position. They certainly saw themselves as superior to the mere external consultant. I could easily live with that. Some few others were control freaks and had the idea that the external consultants were creaming off and making far too much money without any accountability or responsibility. That particular theme will go on and on. For the EC grades below the fonctionary levels they can never hope to break into the higher strata and they remained as helpers, deriving little or no satisfaction from the much higher authority and rates of compensation paid to the fonctionaires.
In contrast to the World Bank, for example, the Commission does not employ teams of experts in-house. As I’ve noted above the fonctionnaire is responsible for the file. He/she relies on outsiders for technical advice and assistance. There isn’t a consciously built in-house institutional memory and that sometimes shows in comparison with the in-depth, in-house professional teams of experts recruited by the World Bank.

For consultants working for the Commission they need to be broad generalists because the job requirements and ToRs are always changing from project to project. The Bank in contrast prides itself on its professional expertise and can be faulted with a certain arrogance and dominance arising from its conviction that it’s simply the best. The Bank’s overarching ethos is American while the Commission sees itself as being definitely European and a wielder of ‘soft power’ on the world political stage as opposed to a more robust US approach.

Earlier the position of the World Bank vis-à-vis a beneficiary country government was dominant. Latterly this has changed as beneficiary countries realise that the Commission provides grants which don’t have to be paid back while the Bank provides credits and is in the last analysis a bank and has to be paid back. Beneficiary countries will now try to shop around and will weigh the bureaucratic procedures of the Commission and bi-lateral states against the greater flexibility but greater cost applying to a World Bank credit. It has resulted in temporary marriages being entered into by both forms of institutions.

Sometimes such as with the Eritrean project (Chapter XXIII below) both the beneficiary country and the Commission will opt to enter a trust agreement arrangement with the Bank. The hope is that the more flexible Bank procedures will be adopted instead of the heavy, often very ponderous arrangements stipulated by the Commission to ensure the necessary
levels of transparency and accountability. It is ironic to find the Commission opting for the Bank’s procedures instead of its own!

I’ve focused above on my developing relationship with the EC EuropeAid in several of its manifestations. Working with the EC constituted a large part of my overseas career. Perhaps I should dwell a little on another international agency and my initial experiences with it. On departing from the Irish state service I identified the need to market myself. I embarked on my new career with a circular rail trip that took in Brussels, Geneva and Paris. I knocked on the usual doors inside the European Commission and had the usual marketing lunches and quasi-promises and then I departed for Geneva. Then I presented myself to some of the International Labour Office contacts which I had earlier made through FÁS and went through the same marketing routine I had done previously in Brussels. Interestingly enough the International Labour Office (ILO) was interested in having me for a possible two to three year contract in Pakistan. The title was UN Project Architect and it would involve getting a construction contract for 28 vocational centres across Pakistan back on the rails.

They appeared to be interested in having me because of the earlier involvement I had had with building the FÁS training centres throughout Ireland. In turn I had very much appreciated the set-up and the apparent life and career styles the officials had in Geneva. There were a number of approaches from the International Labour Office sustained over some twelve months requesting me to consider joining them. Indeed, the people in the ILO weren’t used to being put on a long finger and wouldn’t be put off. I remember there were several benefits through joining the UN as a long-term official including their payment of our sons’ university fees. Being tax-free it would certainly have paid off some bills as well. For the UN my entry grade was dictated by the relevant and specific involvement I had had in training and in particular my management of the FÁS training centre programme.

The UN is very much a family and in practice once you were in they have the assumption that you were part of that family: capable and most importantly that you knew the requirements in terms of the role of an international civil servant and your relationship with the host governments. I subsequently worked with the ILO out of its Turin Training Centre on a short-term mission in Albania. Unfortunately because I was away on other missions I wasn’t available to take up some further offers including one I remember to Mongolia. Subsequently I worked for a spell with UNDP in Tajikistan.

Perhaps the crowning result of these earlier involvements was many years later when I was team leader of an EC mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. There was a hotly contested disagreement between UNDP and UNICEF on the respective institutional roles each UN organisation should have in the Tracts in relation to education and community development. They were both very anxious to avoid having any dirty washing exposed to the general donor community and the government. As soon as both heads of organisation learned of my previous experience with the UN they were very happy to have me as an arbitrator to broker a broadly acceptable outcome.

My involvement with the World Bank grew out of my appointment under the UN to Pakistan. I had a major role as UN Project Architect in preparing studies and documentation for and then participating in the multi-donor monitoring missions organised under the aegis of the World Bank Resident mission in Islamabad. Following completion of my UN period in Pakistan I was approached directly by the EC and appointed as team leader for the EC on nine subsequent missions in connection with the Social Action Programme Project (SAPP).
So my involvement with the World Bank commenced with their local field mission rather than with their HQ in Washington.

These connections made in the field enabled me subsequently to represent the EC at a technical level at donor conferences in Washington and in Copenhagen. In effect and without my being aware of it at the time the Pakistan experience exposed me to a range of contacts with most of the major donor agencies. The friendships and connections built up in Pakistan with World Bank and UN officials were to be of considerable benefit to me at later stages of my career.

Some development issues
Working in development a practitioner has to deal with a number of unusual situations. A key factor in aid is the absorption capacity of the beneficiary country. Given there is always a need for a developing country to access funds the instinct of the donor organisation will be to advance as much as possible against targeted outcomes. Donors could be accused of being supply-driven. This can often be for very positive reasons. A critical issue is whether a country will be able to use and absorb a particular level of funding over the time stipulated in the Aid Agreement.

While too little will have its own sad consequences in terms of the comprehensiveness of the new initiative when costs have to be pared: too much means the door will possibly be open for corruption.

Donors privately will recognise levels of ‘leakage’ when dealing with particular beneficiary countries. Corruption is always the elephant in the room when financing agreements are being negotiated. Some countries in my day were infamous for the venality of their administrations. In contrast others were almost clean. Corruption is mostly found in construction and equipment procurement, especially the former. The Commission and bilateral countries organisations will generally be happy to pass over responsibility for those elements of a programme or project to the World Bank or one of the Regional Banks such as the Asian Development Bank or the African Development Bank. The Banks will be repaid their credits. As observed earlier the grant donors will not.
To return to my theme: another novelty is related to the supply-driven aspects of development funding. The European Commission has been regularly criticised that it is poorly managed on the basis of the shortfall in its achievement of its expenditure targets. This criticism was and continues to be strident. At the same time dealing with of the order of one hundred developing countries is highly complex and again Murphy’s Law can apply anywhere and at any time. So the Commission will press for recipient countries to redouble their efforts so as to meet the Commission’s annual funding targets.

Some countries for whatever reason will take exception to being steamrolled in a particular direction and if they’re wise will refrain from taking the money until they are assured the purposes for which it is being offered are achievable. I was really surprised when the anti-corruption organisation in the Philippines turned on us abruptly and sent us back in the queue because they didn’t want the Commission’s money until they had resolved and agreed amongst themselves a detailed agenda as to the purposes it should be spent on.

I am working with my Filipino team colleagues at an Agricultural Research Centre at Davao, Mindanao.

Small projects are difficult and costly to manage so the whole movement is now towards integrated approaches shared by the more significant donor agencies such as the European Commission, the Banks and the larger national bilateral agencies.

Then there is the degree of institutional competition between donor agencies. This covers many aspects but a key one is the role of the respective individual donors in identifying the overall project and in assuming leadership. The World Bank has traditionally occupied this role. This is now changing as donors combine to provide huge levels of budget support involving hundreds of millions of dollars or Euros. In these circumstances it is necessary to have pooling mechanisms and facilities which will compensate for instances where one donor has a delay in obtaining approval to release funds or where the budgetary year differs between the different donor agencies and the supply of funds is not uniformly available to a government ministry or agency to enable them to implement sector reforms.
At the same time there continues to be a natural tension between the roles of the Banks which as noted above are to lend money and recover it later and the grant donor community who want as far as possible to ensure that everything is agreed and in place before they release their funds as - once released - there is no way to recover the funds provided!

About 1990 to 1991 Italian colleagues in the Commission who wanted to leave as well as the Italian national training organisation began to organise themselves for an imminent European tender for establishing an External Office to the European Commission to be based in Brussels. I was initially flattered to be asked to draw up the tender. The main participants were the Italians, their Spanish counterparts in vocational training, a large Greek project management consultancy whose mentor was the then Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs – and me.

Any exhilaration after we won the tender soon wore off when I found myself based in a new set of external offices in Brussels and with leaving the family behind in Dublin. I also had to deal daily and frustratingly with a group of Italian management people; my new found colleagues had collared the influential areas such as the financial administration.

Again, these Italians were from a not insignificant national institution, which managed a network of some three thousand training and employment centres. Run on what to me appeared close to Mafiosi ordinances, they were led by a suave dignified white-haired tutto di capi who was never seen without several acolytes and runners in attendance. Minutes of meetings when produced were a revelation and often seemed to address issues on another planet altogether. To compensate in a very Italian way I understood they assembled once a year to visit the Pope in Rome and to receive his blessings. The remainder of the year they reverted to what I personally identified as Mediterranean Management Practices – very hierarchical, lots of references to the Mama, whispering together and their success in occupying and manipulating the main influential areas covering direction, financial management, procurement etc.

To be fair, their very numbers made this possible. But for me I recognised their instinctive gift for intrigue - and they certainly had style. Disagreements with them by northern representatives such as me and requests for information of a budgetary nature were met more with pain mixed with apparent compassion and some wry humour than with any apparent malice. On occasions, there could be passionate exchanges but generally arrangements were reached in conclave and agreed in advance off-stage.

Pros and Cons to working as a consultant

Over the years I have often found the European Commission to be more than a little frustrating. On occasion I have almost reached a point of chucking it up and returning home I have been so exasperated. But the range of cultures and interactions between them is what makes the EC so interesting – and certainly not the bureaucratic rules we as consultants were so often required to follow.

However, I have always been grateful to the Commission for two things which certainly contributed to our work. One is the decision of the Commission to have mixed gender project missions. A lady on board usually ensures that the men are somewhat civilised. Ladies on EC teams act as visible role models in developing countries like Pakistan where, as already noted, traditionally women have little say and are often disposed of in marriage as things rather than as fully equal human beings.
I subscribe very much to the fundamental importance of the role of women in development. Men look after themselves but women are concerned with themselves of course but also with the family; not only with education but with the very important health and reproductive issues. Once in Baluchistan in Pakistan we arranged to have a visit to an isolated village to see for ourselves the quality and range of education being provided for girls and general health services. We arrived with our escort very early in the morning. It was indicated to me that I should remain standing in the centre of the village with a local gunman posted to ensure I didn’t move. My female colleague as a woman was invited into the school and spent nearly an hour enquiring through translators as to the curriculum and levels of access by girls to the school, funding and the like and marvelling at what she heard.

I think it’s appropriate here to make some comments on the mostly positive pleasant working and personal relationships I developed with European friends and consultant colleagues I’ve worked together with on numerous missions. At their best the mixture of European nationalities works well together as a team and not as individuals. Again at their best they are focused and mostly open to explain and explore different perspectives in relation to challenging issues. A downside I’ve associated with World Bank teams is the way individuals have often huge egos and the way presenters perform more to get one over on their colleagues instead of endeavouring to build bridges and engage with the people and officials they are supposed to be helping. To my mind and in contrast my EC colleagues were not given to histrionics or ‘tantrums’. Although I remember well a colleague explained to me that in her opinion each member state of the European Union represents a different tribe. I wasn’t sure whether she meant this in a drum-thumping sense.

My continental-based consultant colleagues were all fine linguists. Although it had to be most challenging most of them spoke not one but several languages. They were also extremely good at networking not just across Europe but all over the world. On mission in such an environment I found it fun to be working in an operation which was multi-cultural and broadly based. Given the uncompromising demands by the Commission for reports to be presented in perfect English I like to think that maybe there was synergy in the way I contributed ‘mother-tongue expertise’ in the field and in making presentations, report writing and the like.

One thing I was to learn thoroughly as a consultant working internationally was that it just isn’t possible to plan one’s personal affairs and timings. That part of one’s life is handed over to governments and the international organisations. Another aspect although I didn’t realise it was that I wasn’t going to be quite so much at home to my family again. I had to take whatever opportunities were available. On the positive side I was my own manager doing what was interesting and challenging. I had the support of the family and I was out of the lock-up of a semi-state regime. It none the less took a long time for me to drop the habit of working a nine to five day in a five-day week or to drop feelings of guilt if I wasn’t working a full day. I think everyone in similar circumstances experiences these feelings.

One of several times I found myself on the wrong side of individual colleagues in the Commission concerned a project to source, manufacture and distribute some eight hundred million condoms up the Buriganga River to Dhaka in Bangladesh. I was phoned up one April 1st by an Italian who had been referred to me by one of his colleagues. Given the day that was in it – I asked him was he serious? He insisted he was and asked how did I think he felt about it as a Catholic Italian?
But I encountered the same attitude or worse especially from male colleagues in the Commission and coming from traditional countries such as France and Italy. One asked why I had let myself be involved in a project which prostituted the very concept of development. Some you might persuade – others you couldn’t. I received a fair measure of support from female colleagues. Anyway I was convinced it was the right thing to do and I was happy to sign up a Malaysian-British consortium to provide them. The project was a success and a couple of years later I was requested to prepare a final evaluation report.

This story reminds me of an amusing incident when I was working in the Philippines on a capacity building project involving three agricultural Ministries or as they call them, Departments. There was a very big inter-donor and government discussion on what we should call the programme. I came up with the suggestion that we should call it the Philippines Institutional Strengthening Agricultural Programme. This was accepted including by the relevant members of the European Delegation in Manila who were of non-English mother tongue. It was different though when it went back to their more senior colleague in Brussels. He much to my disappointment immediately picked up the implication of an acronym like PISAP!!

An initial mission to some of the ASEAN countries

For weeks I had been travelling to Brussels and popping my head around the offices of the Commission when a friend advised me to knock on the door of a particular official who wanted someone for Indonesia. This official wanted to have a project prepared which would focus on finding and then organising EC support for a Centre of Excellence in every one of the ASEAN states which then covered Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore.

![Malaysia I think and a busy Hindu stupa.](image)

The key objective was that the Centre of Excellence must focus on a major skill of national importance in the host country and be of significance in the remaining countries. My colleague was to be a Frenchman. The mission would visit each country and we were allocated a six-week duration. I was thrilled at the challenge that was being presented. The mission took place sometime in 1988. If I go into some detail my intention is to highlight the
ease with which a consultant can operate amongst these generous and welcoming peoples as well as the unforeseen and often amusing situations one can easily find oneself in.

My colleague was and remains I hope a sensitive, gallant and intellectual Frenchman. He saw the benefits accruing to a Frenchman as being perhaps of a more genteel persuasion than to any other of his European equivalents – including an Irishman. On the flight out he regaled me with his dilemmas and successes in terms of the relationships which were ongoing in his research laboratory and this certainly put my ears a little backwards. However, given the romantic nature of the man and a degree of pretension I discovered - I felt it might be too direct – at least until we were well into the mission and learned a lot more about each other.

This was the mission where I developed a close friendship with a ranking Chinese in the Malaysian Ministry of Labour. That friendship continued despite a very tragic experience and in later years Daphne and I both stayed with him and his wife after he had retired.

Jakarta, Indonesia

A year or two previously I had been several times in Jakarta on behalf of FÁS my Irish semi-state organisation. This time it was as a consultant, team leader to the European Commission and a lot more challenging professionally.

A happy picture taken enroute to a meeting.

Our first port of call for the mission was Jakarta where we were welcomed by the lady Director in charge of Indonesian/European relations. There must have been my French colleague and I, the lady and about twenty of her amanuenses with their notebooks all sitting upright around the conference table and without saying a word. I introduced the topic of our mission and after a while as I continued speaking I felt the lady Director’s toes going up and down my trouser leg. I withdrew my feet discretely and tried to keep the discussion going.
forward. The lady seemed to be much more interested in us – and especially in me – much to
my embarrassment.

Then I was very much taken aback when after about fifteen minutes my French colleague got
up on his feet and declared that “this is not technical exchange – this is romance”! It was
difficult to maintain a straight face particularly in front of the Director and all her record
keepers. I thanked her and closed the meeting. I never saw her again.

I think my colleague was more humiliated than insulted as his very French amour propre had
been involved. We didn’t get on so well after that incident. Indeed after we had met the FÂS
team working in the Ministry of Manpower in Jakarta and been for a somewhat wine-laden
dinner it was his considered opinion that Irishmen were so much like soldiers - NCOs at that -
and there was not much of French gentleness about them!

A couple of days later he surprised me by informing me that the real purpose of his
involvement in the mission was to be in a position to attend an interview for a long-term job
based with the EC in Bangkok.

He thanked me in advance for covering the remainder of the ASEAN countries on my own
and said he would repay me with a dinner when I arrived in Bangkok. He paid me a
compliment in noting that my English was superior to his and so he in his very diplomatic
manner confirmed his expectation that I should write the draft of the report. I admit I was
somewhat taken aback but I reckoned my own company might be safer than running the risk
of another outburst. Certainly one emotional outburst at an important meeting was more than
sufficient.

I visited Singapore and met my old friend Fergus Healey from Sandycove, Co. Dublin, who
was the doyen of the diplomatic core. Somewhat elderly, he had been married several times
to European and American women in a life full of incident but had settled down contentedly
to end his days with a charming Indonesian lady.

The Singaporeans were not excited by the prospect of sharing the project with their ASEAN
colleagues. The felt they already were on a par with European standards and politely sent me
on my way. This wasn’t unusual as there is no doubt that they were and continue to be very
advanced in their technologies.

I never felt quite at home there. It’s so like Big Brother is watching you. There are penalties
for everything from the death penalty for possession of drugs to dropping a cigarette in the
street. I always felt as I passed through the city state that three days was more than enough.

I took myself off to Brunei-Darussalam, the richest country on a
per capita basis in the world. It’s small with a population of about
four hundred thousand and thrives on oil. It has as a result a very
high proportion of expatriates living there. Fergus had overridden
my caution about the necessity of having a visa. He mentioned I could call him at home if there was a problem as he knew the relevant officials; working with them on a day to day basis. To my surprise and horror when I needed to phone him he wasn’t reachable and I very nearly found myself in jail for non-possession of a visa. When I explained the purpose of my visit was concerning EC grant aid the officials relented and I was confined to a hotel for the weekend.

Brunei and some idea of where this tiny statelet is in the South China Sea.

Brunei Darussalam in translation means the Nation of Brunei, the Abode of Peace\(^\text{11}\). An interesting little place it is a sovereign state located on the north coast of the island of Borneo, in Southeast Asia. A tiny country it is divided into two small enclaves on the island of Borneo. Apart from its coastline with the South China Sea, it is completely surrounded by the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. It can trace its beginnings to the 7th century and converted to Islam in the 15th century.

As a small little country it has had plenty of experience of European expansion. It was visited by Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 and fought the Castille War in 1578 against Spain. Its empire began to decline with the forced ceding of Sarawak to James Brooke, an English freebooter, and the ceding of Sabah to the British North Borneo Chartered Company. It finally became a British protectorate in 1888, receiving a resident in 1906. It gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1984.

Anyway, the next working day I was driven into the city and introduced to my counterparts. I was taken to see some training centre in the jungle. As we drove I chatted happily to the driver. He told me he had a master’s degree from, I think, Nottingham in the U.K. He reminisced that his father, uncles and grandfather had been head hunters in Borneo. I responded by saying how happy I was to be with the Nottingham graduate rather than his relations and I kept a close eye on him.

I remember seeing the picture of the monarch of Brunei everywhere with two ladies: one older the other quite young. I assumed it was the monarch, his queen and their daughter but no – it was wife number one and wife number two. Proportionately there were a high number

\(^{11}\) Once again I’m indebted to Wikipedia for some background. Brunei Darussalam shares this ‘Haven of Peace’ appellation with Dar us Salam, the Tanzanian commercial capital and sea port. This correlation gives some idea of the historical expansion by the Arabs over many centuries.
of expatriates, mostly English involved in military issues and employed as part of longstanding security arrangements with the U.K. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. I met an Irishman originally from Aer Lingus who looked after the Boeing jet. The monarch used it for formal state visits and for flying with his entourage of ladies, horses and stable staff to race meetings all over the world.

Flying up to Malaysia we passed through huge monsoon clouds with lightning flashing in a very dramatic way. Malaysia was very much bigger and different. There is Peninsular Malaysia and then parts located on parts of the islands of Borneo and Sarawak. Politically and legislatively it is very much a Muslim country; very much a country for the native Malays - or Bumapatra (sons of the soil) – whereas the other indigenous races especially the overseas Chinese, Indians, Tamils are accepted with only some modicum of toleration. It’s difficult to accept that the Malay population received subsidies for a range of areas such as education and medical support which are denied to non-Malays.

Outside KL: The natural grotto which is a Hindu place of pilgrimage.

During the Raj the British established a number of Hill Stations high above in the cool mountain locations where they took off for weekends. They were beautiful places to visit. Apart from its Bumapatra policies Malaysia is fairly tolerant of the different religions represented. During the nineteenth century British plantation owners brought or smuggled oil palms to the county from South America and there are plantations spreading as far as the eye can see.
Near to Kuala Lumpur there is a natural grotto the size of a large European cathedral where Hindus worship. There is a huge Hindu celebration where religious zealots pierce themselves with knives and enter into something of a trance. Access to the grotto is by interminable flights of stairs but the overall impression is majestic and wonderful. I was told they trained the Malaysian army recruits by having them run up and down the steps with full gear and equipment.

I’ve made several visits on different missions to this modern second-world country. About that time Malaysia had decided to drop English as a main school subject. I think they discovered this was a mistake and they subsequently moved to rectify it fairly rapidly. During my first time there or on a later subsequent mission they executed several Australians including a woman for involvement in drugs. The executions were a main topic in the media and in conversation and hung over the city like a pall until they were over. I abominate the death penalty and found it difficult to come to terms with providing assistance to a government that could do such things.

Never the less, both my local counterpart friend and his best friend the Sikh tried to keep my attention away from these grim matters. It was either on that mission or a subsequent one we ran a mini-marathon through Kuala Lumpur charted by my counterpart and which involved jumping over motorway fences and finally coming to a watering hole in a very old established cricket club in the centre of town. As I got to know him better we came to an understanding that for future visits I’d bring along some XO brandy with me instead of whiskey. I learned that Chinese, whether overseas or natives, have a huge capacity for alcohol. So do Sikhs!

And now I come to one of the really sad events of my career. One afternoon on a subsequent mission I was picked up by my counterpart at the airport as usual. He dropped me off at my hotel and we arranged to meet for business discussions the following morning. That evening
his daughter was attending a high school graduation party when she slipped on a staircase, broke her neck and died. She was a lively, beautiful young Chinese girl with great enthusiasm and style. Her parents had intended that she should enrol for an undergraduate course somewhere in the United States. She had begun to think about life and religion and subsequently it was found that she of her own account had been taking lessons in Christianity and especially Catholicism. One of her aunts had converted from Buddhism to Catholicism. I still recall her clearly in my mind. Even today if I see a Chinese girl with a bun in her hair I am painfully reminded of her.

The next day’s meeting was one of devastation. My friend and his wife were understandably in paroxysms of misery. He requested me as the only Christian he as a Buddhist knew to conduct the funeral in a Christian manner. He felt as she had been intending to convert she should have a religious Christian funeral. I agreed that if he couldn’t find anyone else better qualified I’d arrange to provide prayers but I pointed out somewhat lamely that I was a religious “back-slider”. But in such dire straits one doesn’t stand on ceremony and it seemed to comfort both parents that I had accepted the obligation.

I realised that I could share the sorrow of my new-found friends and participate deeply in their lives at such a tragic time. I think we all can share huge events and be involved as fellow human beings. I learned a lot about multi-culturalism and the generous nature of Malaysian society. I learned with some wonderment details of the way the Chinese prepare the grave location and orientation to appease the spirits. I also witnessed the disreputable approaches of some local journalists at this time of great sorrow. I’ll try to explain.

For the period of the funeral all my normal work was suspended. I was invited to the house in Damansara, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur or KL as it is better known. My friend and his wife and her sister requested me to accompany them to the city morgue for one last glimpse of their daughter and niece. I went in a sense of duty and with some trepidation. Inside the morgue on a large silver dish the girl’s body was being prepared. The heat was intense and the body was kept well cooled down with a sprinkler. When the ladies saw her they rushed to pick her up in their arms and this is what my friend had warned me about. They were not to touch her. He restrained his wife and I held back her sister. Then they broke down. It was sad, sad.

After some time they composed themselves and we left the morgue. We were accosted by three or four young journalists who enquired was I the man responsible for the young girl’s death? I could have attacked them I was so convulsed. My friend drew me away and we left them. I still feel my hackles rise after so many years that such people could lack all sensitivity for their fellow men.

In the time we were away the garden of their bungalow had been covered with galvanised iron to provide shadow for the mourners. As a privileged guest I was appointed to keep a record of the funeral donations. I sat by the hall door and took the notes and recorded the contributions. I was amazed. I was the only Caucasian there. There were Chinese, Malays, Sikhs, Indians, Tamils, Thais and all were dressed out in their national costumes. All had come to share the grief of their friend. From a religious point of view there were Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus of all castes and persuasions. I think I was the only vaguely Christian – a poor representative of such a powerful group! Then the coffin was brought and placed beside the door with a small window showing the girl’s face and very much made up. People swayed in grief and cried.
Some way through the speeches and commiserations of this multi-cultural and multi-confessional ceremony my friend detailed someone to bring me to an Indian restaurant for a chapatti with curry. It was my bad luck to pick up a dose of Delhi-belly and I retreated to my hotel with about as much dignity as I could muster. I left the field physically and mentally devastated.

By the day of the funeral I had recovered somewhat and was given my fairly high profile position beside the family at the grave side. It was hot but the grave had been opened and all around was decked out with fresh flowers. In amongst the flowers were candles which were lit as the ceremony commenced. I was very struck with the candles flickering on the ground as if presaging the departure of Shirley’s spirit to some happier place. When it came to me to make my religious input there was another Christian lady present. I did my best trying to get through a decade of the rosary. The mourners seemed to appreciate it and the family were grateful. I hope I helped ease their pain – even a little.

My friend and his wife stayed in touch with me for many years. They both converted to Roman Catholicism as they explained to me so that through conversion they would meet again with their daughter. My friend has been appointed to several senior hospital administration boards for the Christian hospitals. On a couple of occasions during later missions he insisted I join him at meetings of his religious group where I have tried to say some useful things about improving education and health.

About seven or eight years ago Daphne and I stopped over in KL on the way out and back to Bali and we stayed with the family. It’s always a pleasure to visit KL. Malaysia is booming with its new KL airport, its twin towered highest building in the world (for now) and its international Formula Four racing track. It’s a developed country.

But I very much regret that I’ve lost regular contact with my friend. He was becoming a very committed Christian. It could be that as a Malaysian-Chinese he and his wife have been attracted to the opening up of China and the rediscovery of their ancestral groups there. On one occasion it was fun to hear him and his wife preparing the vast array of presents for travelling to meet their relations outside the major Chinese cities. It must have been like the generosity displayed by our American relations when they came home to visit poor Ireland after the Second World War.

We had arranged that they would visit us in Ireland but it hasn’t happened - at least so far.

I’m moving chronologically to the next focus of my attention – the Philippines. Again, I’ve had several missions there in addition to my first introduction. This is a wonderful country with indigenous Malay, Chinese, American and Spanish influences and with staggeringly beautiful islands and people. All islanders speak their own language or dialect as well as an unmistakable active-tense American version of English. All have Spanish Christian and surnames which to my knowledge they question. Many recognise it as a result of the Spanish
conquest and forced conversion and take exception to it. Almost all have nicknames – some of which are very funny.

Colonised first by the Spanish; they learned from them their Roman Catholic religion along with some more recent variants. On Good Friday they enact the crucifixion with crosses and real nails through the flesh and flagellation. I was impressed by the ways it was familiar: a little bit like Ireland had been earlier and with the church and especially the eponymous Cardinal Sin who as a symbol of this friendly and capable people and their sins summed up in his name the many contradictions I found there. However, in the countryside the habit of praying to rice god images survives. During the late 1980s and early 1990s I was involved in three missions there. The first was an extension of the Centres of Excellence project and moved along without too much trouble in a very pleasant atmosphere.

I remember flying the first time from Dublin to Frankfurt and then on to Hong Kong by direct Lufthansa flight. Flying over China and looking down from a great height we could see yellow mountains and valleys; looking like a lunar moonscape. We seemed to fly over them for hours before descending between high buildings to land at the old Hong Kong airport. After a short stay in Hong Kong and a buying expedition we headed east over the China Sea to Manila.

I found the Filipinos to be the most westernised of the Far-East peoples I have met; either through language or through religion. At the same time there is whole-scale corruption in the political sphere with rebellions and uprisings and an ongoing war with the Muslim people in the South, especially on the island of Mindanao.

While I was working in Manila there was a terrorist campaign against US troops stationed in the Philippines. A number were reported to have been assassinated by radical “sparrows” as they waited at bus stops or taxi ranks. I felt very sympathetic for them but it only occurred to me late in my time there that to any Filipino with a gun - I looked just like an American
serviceman! Instead, I went sight-seeing everywhere I could. I ran around the circular road outside the various government departments in Quezon City on weekends at 5am and then queued up for a fresh pineapple drink provided direct from the fruit by a vendor with a machete. It’s a country I would love to return to – but like all countries where there is a vast distance between rich and poor – it has its hard side...

After my first meeting with the Agricultural Secretary I thought I was being invited out to lunch. Instead I found myself most embarrassingly accompanying him and his senior officials to a massage parlour where all red-faced I made my diplomatic excuses and withdrew! To some extent it follows the pattern in other Far Eastern countries where women are imposed upon and the men are traditionally in charge and with a fair amount of abuse.

Coincidentally Fr. Seamus Cullen, who came from my local village Glasthule and who had been in the FCA with me in Dun Laoghaire, was the parish priest at one of the US bases in Luzon. He was famous nation-wide across the Philippines for the way he excoriated the practices of prostitution and was always in the newspapers whenever I was there. Coming home I heard that he was subject to almost daily death threats from brothel owners and that ilk. He is tough and took no prisoners in exposing the vested interests. He even went after US servicemen back in the United States who had fathered children with the local women and left. He prosecuted them successfully.

Ermeta is a suburb of the huge Metro-Manila which was an exciting place to be when we as a three man team first arrived after the long flight from Europe. But we were soon moved out of there and moved on for safety and propriety to the Manila Hotel, a most upmarket place where we stayed a few days at discounted rates organised by the European Commission. The Manila Hotel is about the most stylish hotel I’ve ever stayed in. It’s right on the sea. If there is to be a revolution it is the place where the first grenade is thrown through the window to announce it! There have been numerous revolutions over the years and these have been accompanied by numerous assaults on the property, as we were proudly informed by the hotel staff. It is the haven of the super-rich and you found quite a few dubious characters and beautiful girls moving about – quite in contrast to us mission members.
Just outside the hotel there is a large memorial park named after the foremost Filipino patriot, Jose Rizal, in the struggle for independence against Spain. It is surmounted by the most hideous power station I have ever seen. It all goes to add to the enormous problem of pollution that the whole of Metro-Manila suffers from. The old historical centre of Intra-Muros was flattened during the Second World War with only a few buildings and several churches surviving. It’s a great pity. Inside the Cathedral there is the tomb of Archbishop O’Doherty testifying to Irish influences. These influences have been reciprocated by the substantial number of Filipino nurses and their families who have settled recently in Ireland.

Walls and Spanish Gate surrounding Intra Muros (Inside the Walls) part of Manila.

Jose Rizal, who as I mentioned was executed by the Spanish, had an Irish mistress. This was in the nineteenth century and she must have been a remarkably independent and self-possessed woman. I was told that every Filipino is taught in school the address made by the patriot before his execution where he consigns this dear lady to the protection and generosity of the Filipino people.

I had an interesting experience involving the Colonel Honassan uprising in about 1992 or thereabouts. Colonel Honassan has since been rehabilitated for his unsuccessful attempt at a coup to subvert the constitution. Ironically, the man is now a Member of the Parliament and could be a future Presidential candidate. It was explained to me that Filipinos don’t hold grudges against revolutionaries – even against the Marcoses. Fernando and Emelda Marcos are long since forgiven. In particular I was assured that Filipinos love everything American once the US army left. I was so impressed with the virtuosity in the design and adornment of the “love bugs”: converted US army jeeps which were the buses all over Metro-Manila. It is very reminiscent of the way Bedford trucks produced in Pakistan were upgraded.

To return to the uprising: it was about 10am on a Saturday morning sometime in November when I and my two German colleagues were out jogging in the hotel grounds. We remarked on a plane we could see at about two miles distance making passes over the road with some rackety sounds coming to us over the intervening countryside. Shortly afterwards the hotel staff rushed out to tell us to come inside as an uprising was taking place. We were instructed not to leave the hotel and were advised that a member of the Agriculture Department would
liaise with us constantly. Parts of the army stationed in bases outside Manila had revolted in a coup against the government.

The hotel was owned by the Agriculture Department and was situated beside the main road running northwards from Quezon City and wider Manila. We were ordered to remain and confined to the hotel basement during daytime for our safety. At night we were let back into our rooms. I saw clearly the gun flashes coming from the tanks advancing southwards towards Manila. Alone in my bed I wondered how I’d welcome an invading and probably terrified young soldier complete with AK 47 into my bedroom.

The Agriculture Department relayed to us the reports they’d received on the rebels’ movements from their field staff. In between we had a call from our responsible functionary in Brussels ordering us to escape as best we could to the Chinese mainland - by junk if necessary. We thought that easier said than done in the wartime situation we found ourselves in. Obtaining transport and passing between the lines of combatants didn’t especially appeal to us. We were well aware of the frequent occasions of piracy reported off the Filipino coast. Further we thought as the local people were taking risks for our safety we owed it to them to follow their instructions. These were that we should remain where we were.

We were let out to go to the Sunday Advent ceremonies in the local university church. The church was pretty with a design that looked a lot like an inverted pudding bowl. The choir of cleanly presented girls and boys and the faithful were present and participating in the familiar ceremonial led by a priest. The church was situated close to a military airfield. About every ten minutes we’d be overwhelmed in the middle of the hymn singing by the sound of a fighter bomber taking off. A short time later we’d hear the reverberations as it dropped its bombs nearby. Then it would come screaming back to base. This went on throughout the full lengthy ceremony. The devout ceremonial in the church and the mayhem taking place outside provided the most extreme of contrasts.

We were taken back in a convoy to our hotel. After some days the coup attempt was put down and we were brought back to the Agriculture Department in triumph. I was asked for our comments and said something along the lines that we were extremely grateful for the protection afforded to us. We felt that along with the people of the European Union we extended our sympathy and prayers to the bereaved. We hoped that damage would be made good and were sure the European Union would assist. Some high ranking official from the government present asked if we as a group would say that on national TV. If we had we would have run immediately foul of usurping the position of the Head of Delegation of the European Union. No way could we oblige. I tried to make this clear to a somewhat disappointed audience. Happily our tickets were for that day’s departure and the airport was a long way away. I would like to have obliged but we just didn’t have the authority.

On another occasion on a mission travelling through rebel held mountains in the Cordilleras we were stopped by the local militia and then allowed continue. They happily concluded that all would benefit from aid for education. They happily concluded that all would benefit from aid for education. At the same time we were painfully aware of an earlier episode in the same rebel-held mountains when a very senior official of the Commission was similarly stopped. Previously he had been briefed by a senior British diplomat recently arrived from Northern Ireland. This diplomat had apparently taken up counter-espionage as a hobby. He presented the EC official with a list of names of all EU and British consultants, experts and volunteers working and tolerated to be in the rebel held areas. The list was in the official’s briefcase when he was stopped and detained for a couple
of days by the rebels. Happily his briefcase wasn’t searched but he was reported to have been extremely sensitive to the risk of disclosure of the names of these innocents and of the mortal danger they could have been in. When he returned back to base there apparently was all Hell to pay with the UK diplomat. It was the talk of the diplomatic circuit while I was there.

There was an amusing side issue to this. The senior European official was accompanied on his site visits by one of our colleagues, an attractive Filipina, who was a widow; her husband having been killed by rebels. Her father-in-law was the then Chief of Staff in the army or someone very senior in the army hierarchy. One day she told us that she thought one of the rebels who stopped the EC official was very attractive. They flirted a little and later in Manila they had dated on a number of occasions. Some lady!

For some reason I was designated to join the Secretary of State for Agriculture to make a visit to remote areas of Mindanao to see the work his staff members were doing for the local tribes peoples. This area was a couple of days drive over very poor roads from the island capital, Davao.

When we visited Mindanao the place was full of troops and armed convoys. We maintained a low profile and kept our distance from all this activity. We went to a shebeen somewhere in the port and had tuna cheeks prepared in a very oily substance. It was explained to us that all the tuna caught was filleted and cleaned for export to Japan. The heads were retained as a local delicacy and we were proudly offered any part of the head that remained. It was all very sensible if not exactly cordon bleu!
Peoples living in this general area were recently widely publicised as belonging to ‘Stone-Age’ traditions and culture. Certainly they have a very basic life style. I accompanied the Secretary of State to a formal meeting with the tribal elders. We met with our translator around a fire surrounded by primitive stone shelters. All the tribe was represented from very aged old men and women to younger hunters/cultivators and women breast feeding their babies. Off to one side there was a group of somewhat toothless old ladies masticating on a brownish liquid and spitting it into a bowl. I will return to the significance of this activity anon.

The meeting opened with an exchange of courtesies. We were all introduced to each other. The translator mentioned that the headman had made enquiries about the “pig”. It took me a while to understand that the “pig” was the local jargon for EC funding which would be made available. I responded that the pig was born and alive and would soon come to Mindanao to be given to the people. Everyone was very pleased and I suppose the European Commission would have enjoyed this unusual exchange of courtesies.

We were then invited to feast on the local chicken and vegetables. Then and I still have a very clear recollection we were invited to drink the thick brown alcoholic liquid which the ladies had worked on and which had begun to ferment in the heat. Sometimes we all have to do the difficult thing – and then pray that we’ll make it back to civilisation with the tummy in reasonable shape. There were no intestinal repercussions and we arrived back in Davao in good shape and none the worst for our partying and the “few jars”.

Mindanao: bride and groom with entourage proceeding to their simple wedding.
I have been through Bangkok on many occasions and with its mixture of tradition and modernity it is one of my favourite Far East Asian cities. I especially recall events from the portion of my Centres of Excellence mission in Thailand. But this admiration for its mixture of tradition and modernity has to be qualified in relation to two main issues. I take great issue with its macho culture regarding the abuse of young women – unfortunately it’s a feature of all Far Eastern countries to a greater or lesser degree. This abuse contrasts itself with the implementation of extremely harsh laws in relation to the Thai monarchy and any level of criticism at all. These laws - and there are numerous examples of harsh sentences imposed - would be considered intolerable in any Western country.

A part of the impressive temple complex in central Bangkok. Superficially and to me they are similar to Khmer architecture as photographed in Phnom Penh and included below - but not to the specialist.

There in Bangkok we were hosted by the Director General of the Thai Vocational Training Institution. There are several experiences which after more than twenty years still stand out in my mind from that first visit. I suppose one may categorise them under prickliness, prawns, princesses and Buddhist monks.

I arrived and was duly met at the airport by two of the Director General’s senior lady colleagues. As we drove directly to meet the DG we found ourselves hemmed in - in a huge traffic jam. Bangkok used to be famous for them. The ladies were stiffly proper and with so much time I endeavoured to start a little friendly conversation about their families; had they children and the like? I later learned that I had made an appalling blunder. In Thai upper circles this could be seen as my importuning the opposite sex. I rapidly found that both ladies closed up and treated me as almost a monster. Yes, there was that and another occasion when I was tempted to pat the head of a young child which is also frowned upon. Happily I think I learn quickly.

The next occasion was completely different. I was visiting schools somewhere in the Gulf of Thailand. I think it was near Phuket. I had seen all the ladies on their fast motor cycles and I
and my guide had had numerous propositions. About lunchtime we passed a very small harbour and my guide enquired whether I would like an alfresco lunch of prawns. I agreed enthusiastically. We heard a fishing boat come ‘phut-phut-phut’ into the harbour. My guide went down and negotiated with the fisherman. Within half an hour we were reclining in the sun and being fed with freshly grilled prawns from the boat, washed down with Tiger beer. I’ve never forgotten that experience.

Dining with royalty: the princess has her back to the camera.

The princess I encountered was the royal patron of the Vocational Training System in Thailand. Realising that my visit represented one of the first points of contact with the European Commission I was invited to her salon. A middle aged lady she had no hesitation in enquiring about me, my family and home. She asked what Daphne might like as a souvenir? I spent an afternoon in her company touring all or most of the up-market silk shops – or a lot of them. Invariably she was recognised and were escorted into a reception room and served tea or coffee and snacks and waited upon while silks and carvings and the like were presented for my delectation. Happily the exchange rate was very favourable and I could afford a few things and then retreat with dignity.

She was very gracious. She explained much about the royal family. Amongst many confidences I was surprised to learn that a conquering Japanese general in World War II had fallen in love with a princess of the royal family. As a result the Thais – as opposed to the captive expatriates and particularly the prisoners of war building the Bridge over the River Kwai - did not suffer too harshly under Japanese occupation.

I suppose this has been my only brush ever with royalty. I was captivated by her lack of pretensions, her style and her very engaging small talk. At the same time I was vaguely aware from her questioning on my project that she probably considered herself to be only doing her duty on behalf of vocational training in Thailand.
Finally I had an audience with the Director General which went well. As we left he paid me the honour of inviting me to act with his officials as his representative in participating in the royal custom where the king appoints his senior ministers to present the monks of the numerous Buddhist monasteries with new saffron garments at the close of the rainy season and prior to their departure from the monasteries to preach and to minister to the local people. I gladly accepted.

Shortly after and accompanied by the officials we visited an ancient monastery and participated in some sort of Buddhist purification ceremony with the monks. Many of the monks were quite young – certainly only in their early teens. Their apparent innocence and their humility in accepting the king’s presents from my hands impressed me hugely. I am attracted to Buddhist way of life. I’ve always considered it to be an optimum solution were I ever to revert to becoming religious.