Chapter IX

Out of Africa….and short impressions of time spent in Lesotho, Swaziland, South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe

The Sub-Saharan African countries I went on mission to or visited for some reason or another were Lesotho, Swaziland, South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe but it seems to be such a long time ago. The picture below is certainly of a much younger looking me. So in the last few days I’ve spent some time casting my mind back to identifying impressions and recollections made through the working visits; some of them continuing over several years. In contrast some individual visits, such as the visit to Swaziland, or the couple of visits to South Africa were short enough.

![Karen Blixen’s Cottage, near Nairobi, Kenya and a young looking me.](image)

For this sub-chapter I’ve taken my theme from ‘Out of Africa’ the true if tragic and romantic story of Karen Blixen, the Danish lady, who lived in Nairobi, Kenya and whose house looks back to the Luthuli Hills where her lover is buried. Somehow and for some reason I’ve forgotten how or why an Irish colleague and I dreamed up a pretext for visiting Nairobi and the Aberdare Hills and some other areas associated with the novel ‘White Mischief’. To my mind Kenya has to be one of the most beautiful countries in the world. We must have been there for a meeting. I remember the spacious old-world elegance of the Norfolk Hotel and its yellow lamp-post lighting which was probably the meeting venue.
During our stay we visited Lake Naivasha a freshwater lake lying North West of Nairobi. It is part of the Great Rift Valley. The lake is home to a variety of wildlife; over 400 different species of birds have been reported. There is a sizeable population of hippos in the lake. There are two smaller lakes in the vicinity of Lake Naivasha: Lake Oloiden and Lake Sonachi (a green crater lake).

The Crater Lake Game Sanctuary lies nearby, while the lake shore is known for its population of European immigrants and settlers. Between 1937 and 1950 the lake was apparently used as a landing place for flying boats on the Imperial Airways passenger and mail route from Southampton in Britain to South Africa. Joy Adamson, the author of Born Free, lived on the shores of the lake in the mid-1960s. On the shores of the lake is the Djinn Palace, which gained notoriety in the Happy Valley days between the two world wars.

For British people there was a saying which was supposed to have summed up post First World War demobilisation: the commissioned ranks resettled in Kenya and the non-commissioned ranks went to Zimbabwe.

But perhaps some of the ‘White Mischief’ notoriety still remains. I still recall vividly the two of us ringing on the door of a guesthouse surrounded by high walls adjacent to the lake shore. The door was opened by two or three slender and elegantly

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1 A widely known novel and film dealing with high life in between the wars Kenya. 
coiffed young white English speaking girls. The contrast between their appearance and the two of us in sweaty safari clothing after a few days in the bush was striking. We couldn’t afford the accommodation and at the same time we were happy to return to another much less salubrious guesthouse somewhere in the bush. There was something not quite right about the earlier place!

Africa is so vast. Some of the countries in which I worked were at an altitude of 4,000 feet. The scale and the sense of exhilaration it brings from working at such altitudes, but also from wider perspectives linked to the colour and the majestic speckled blue and cloudy skies stretching from horizon to horizon can’t but impress the visitor. Looking back on my mind’s eye it is just so different from the low-lying scenery around my city and county of Dublin that I am so accustomed to. Then there is the relationship on a daily basis between the majority African populations and myself as a white-nosed ‘Bwana’.

When looking at the map of Zambia I’ve always been drawn to the pedicle or elephant’s foot detached from it by Queen Victoria to ensure her uncle, the Belgian King Albert, could have access to some copper reserves.

I was intrigued with the Africans I met. I made many friends, and at the same time, I was conscious that there had been many interactions between the black and white races over hundreds of years and there was a certain distance. I don't think it was just about appearances. I think it stems from a whole different way of looking at life.
Perhaps mixed into this different sort of Weltanschaung there are ingredients of a greater optimism mixed with a certain degree of fatalism. In my mind’s eye I have the conventional picture of the African man resting with his bottle of beer while his woman or women work to make ends meet.

I’m aware that this is a vast over-simplification and may be even far too harsh. It certainly is in sharp contrast with a number of hard working and idealistic Africans I have encountered. If this allocation of responsibilities ever existed - in parallel and until lately there have been much more relaxed rules in relation to gender and sexual freedoms. These somewhat laidback attitudes have come under great pressure through the huge devastating impacts of sexually transmitted diseases and especially HIV/AIDS across many Sub-Saharan countries.

Lusaka, Zambia 1989/90: these are our senior management students and my colleague and I at the National Institute of Public Administration.

Looking back over some old documents I see that between January 1989 and December 1990 under an appointment to the Irish Institute of Public Administration I gave a series of seven modules of management lectures to a class of senior civil servants in Lusaka, Zambia. Sadly, I remember an air of depression appeared to hang over Lusaka because of the huge impact of HIV/AIDS and the general delicate health of the people caused by poverty. Over the seven modules my colleague and I used to remark on an extreme loss of weight and tiredness in some of the students until they attended class no more. Again, in contrast to this social torpor in Zambia I was very aware of and excited by the Zairian music which seemed to permeate the whole atmosphere later during my time in Tanzania. It was fantastic.

Amongst the highlights of the time I spent in Zambia and neighbouring Zimbabwe there are three or four memories which present themselves with great verve. Almost always coming to the end of the week we made plans to use an Irish Embassy
Volkswagen to take us several hundred miles south east across the border at Chirundi into Zimbabwe. In retrospect, I think we could have looked after it somewhat better. We would drive it over hundreds of kilometres of red dust roads; bouncing it from one bump to another at speed. We have been informed that this was the way to minimise damage. We brought the vehicle on a Monday morning to our local African general repair man in Lusaka who would clean it out meticulously and pin together any broken bits and pieces before we returned it to the Embassy.

We made use of the Embassy car to drive to Harari on more than one occasion. I suppose it was no surprise to find Zimbabwe at that time considerably more developed than Lusaka. Zambia was a front-line state while Zimbabwe had the large white-owned farms and other industries. The price of copper was low which also impacted adversely on Zambia.

Once we managed to gain entrance to the select enclosure at the racecourse in Harari. There over gins and tonics we conversed with the great and the good of the expatriate white society. I thought even then that these whites were living on borrowed time: given the recent past and the movement of sentiment against them and their ways by the majority African population. I remember there was a very pretty young girl whose mother came from Glenageary, Co Dublin, my home parish.

An impression of Zimbabwe

Somewhere along the road in either Zambia or Zimbabwe and stopping...
On another occasion, we were invited to a whites-only party. We danced with several young ladies until our host advised us that we had irritated the men and that we should leave as quickly as we could. Neither of us thereafter had a high opinion of the social graces on display by the male white Zimbabwean community.

We did admire the beauty of the country and the roads infrastructure in Zimbabwe which then was so superior to Zambia. We were impressed too by the huge farms, owned and farmed by the white community and which have been taken over by Mr Mugabe in recent years with ultimately disastrous results. We met many Africans rejoicing in names like ‘Prudence’ or ‘Virtue’ and happy to be part of a new African generation which prided itself on to defeat of the white man during their very recent war of independence. I didn’t have nor, I suppose had they, any inkling of the disastrous turn of events which would unfold under Mr Mugabe.

On the other hand, many of the whites were aware that the white supremacy game was up. They were often very embittered with the British Government for what they saw as treachery during the peace talks then recently concluded in London. One very silly and somewhat stupid reply I’ve always remembered coming from a white Zimbabwean truck driver. I had asked how far it was to the Lake Kariba. He replied, “One bottle of whiskey”. It can't have been good for the safety levels on the roads at night!

The Kariba Dam lies along the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. We camped close to the dam and found the sounds at night somewhat eerie.

Another time, we found ourselves sleeping in the car somewhere along the Zambezi River where we had been tracking impala deer when something woke us up. We switched on the headlights to look straight into the face of an angry hyena. The hyena must be amongst the most ugly of all mammals. When we blasted the horn he ran off.
We were parked in a camping area, and all around us were the backy-trucks and the small caravans that made provision for mobile kitchens and servants’ accommodation for the white families on safari. Then there was a degree of consternation as people piled out of their caravans waving their guns. Happily, no one was injured. But it was not unknown for children to have been snatched from their tents and some had been seriously wounded by marauding hyenas.

On the Zambian side of the border we visited a huge farm which was growing tobacco. The site had been leased from the Zambian government and huge plant – literally gigantic machines - were being used to clear the site, for sowing and reaping the mature tobacco crop. We asked ourselves whether this was the future of farming?

Another time when stopping for a beer in Chirundi after clearing customs, we were surprised to see a hotel notice prominently placed beside the swimming pool, warning patrons off from elephants coming for an evening drink in the pool. I could hardly believe my eyes to see an elephant calmly shambling towards me while I was in the pool. I hurriedly took a photograph and ran to escape.
Another day I was photographing or attempting to photograph a lion with several other colleagues. I felt they were getting far too close to him and when he turned on them they – and I - moved very quickly away. Another impression I have is being taken to a watering hole in a safari park – just before dawn. We could hear tremendous shrieks and bellows and imagined creatures drinking at the waterside being ambushed and taken away as breakfast. It suddenly occurred to me that I might well be being sized up as a potential breakfast morsel myself. I was very relieved to see the sunrise.

Zambia and waiting, watching and listening around a water pool as dawn breaks and as the wild animals come to drink.

Back in Lusaka for the working week we stayed in the Ridgeway hotel, which doubled as a casino and nightclub. At night we would invite our students or staff members of the Institute or friends out for beer and a meal. We seldom were invited to the homes of our African friends. This was not that they didn’t want to invite us - we were assured - but because they could not afford to. In contrast I enjoyed very much the inter-actions during the lecturing sessions. The students had a great sense of humour which emerged very often in interesting homespun analogies to their very disparate lives. I often wished I had greater opportunities to visit into the field and to see how they coped and managed.

In Lusaka we were able to draw a distinction between the respectable Irish and the less respectable Irish people. The respectable Irish were in management positions in donor funded organisations such as the National Institute of Public Administration, or came from large construction companies. They were out in Zambia for a limited period – usually on secondment and intended to return and re-integrate into Irish society. Many of them worked in the central government and came from Irish public bodies. Others almost invariably had some connection with Anglo-American and copper extraction. My brother Garry and his wife Francis worked for seven years for Anglo-American – being based in Kitwe.
These ‘respectables’ we found were often boring to talk to. They lived in middle class houses guarded by security people and large dogs and provided with rape cages against robbers attempting to break into the bedroom areas. I was amazed to see these steel framed ‘rape cage’ partitions. Apparently they were only partially successful as the intruders in frustration at not being able to access the valuables would on occasion set fire to these houses - burning not only the valuables but the men and women cowering inside.

In contrast, the less-respectable Irish lived with African partners and had established what seemed to be long-term presences. They were an interesting and humorous lot. They had no intentions of ever returning home. Generally, they were on the margins of the expatriate society. They were the contacts for deals in illegal currency exchanges, and for supervising domestic forms of construction. I several times observed an exchange for hundreds of thousands of Kwacha being done on the black market with wads of money being produced from the booth of a BMW.

Those that I met reflected a happy-go-lucky approach to life and integration and fathering children which was not a little envied by their more respectable confreres.

Then there were the Irish missionaries. They were as a rule old but strong, simple men who were closely wedded to the needs and aspirations of their congregations. My impression was that they hadn’t much time nor respect for the clerical life and life styles they’d left behind in Ireland. They were respected as a group. I was advised that several of them lived with local female partners as this was often conditional on their acceptance into the local African communities.
Lesotho is a stunningly beautiful, mountainous country with endless hiking trails and the chance to explore remote areas on Basotho ponies. The ‘lowland’ areas (all of which are still above 1000m) offer some glimpses of dinosaur footsteps, while the highlands in the northeast and centre feature towering peaks (over 3000m) and verdant valleys. Hiking or pony-trekking from village to village are the best ways of exploring.

Looking down from the heights of the Drakensburg Mountains

Lesotho came into being during the early 19th century, when both the difaqane (forced migration) and Boer incursions into the hinterlands were at their height. Under the leadership of the legendary King Moshoeshoe the Great the Basotho people sought sanctuary and strategic advantage amid the forbidding terrain of the Drakensberg and Maluti Mountain Ranges. The country gained independence from the UK in 1966. Politics over recent years, including while I was there, have been fairly turbulent. The Basuto National Party ruled for the first two decades. Then the King was exiled in 1990, but returned to Lesotho in 1992 and was reinstated in 1995.

The Kingdom is a landlocked country and an enclave — entirely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. The name Lesotho translates roughly into "the land of the people who speak Sesotho". Lesotho only covers 30,355 square kilometres (11,720 sq. mi). It is also the only independent state in the world that lies entirely above 1,400 meters (4,593 ft.) in elevation. Over 80% of the country lies above 1,800 meters (5,900 ft.).
Constitutional government was restored in 1993 after seven years of military rule. In 1998 violent protests and a military mutiny following a contentious election prompted a brief but bloody intervention by South African and Botswanan military forces under the aegis of the Southern African Development Community. Subsequent constitutional reforms restored relative political stability. Peaceful parliamentary elections were held in 2002, but the National Assembly elections of February 2007 were hotly contested and aggrieved parties continue to periodically demonstrate their distrust of the results.

On one occasion I witnessed an altercation between the police and the army. The issue had to do with pay. Both sides were mortaring each other’s positions across a valley. The local expatriates viewed it all with great excitement from the roof of the luxury hotel situated not very far away from the firing line. They applauded every explosion. I thought it wouldn’t have taken too much effort by either side to have obliterated them. On another occasion on a Saturday and I was relaxing by the hotel pool when someone dragged an unconscious child from the water. With so many children active and jumping in and out of the water and with plenty of noise nobody had noticed he had gone missing. He was taken out and given mouth to mouth resuscitation by two African students. It was certainly a close call.

Lesotho's economy is based on diamonds exported all over the world and water sold to South Africa, manufacturing, agriculture, livestock, and to some extent the earnings of labourers employed in South Africa. Lesotho exports wool, mohair, clothing, and footwear. The majority of households subsist on farming or migrant labour, primarily miners who remain in South Africa for 3 to 9 months.
We looked down on a village community high up in the Drakensburgs. Note the traditional ‘Ron de Val’ huts at bottom left.

Over the decades thousands of workers have been forced by the lack of job opportunities to find work in the South African mines. The country relies on remittances from miners employed in South Africa and customs duties from the Southern Africa Customs Union for the majority of government revenue. South Africa has on several occasions intervened in Lesotho's politics, including in 1998 as noted when it sent its troops to help quell unrest. As the number of mineworkers has declined steadily over the past several years a small manufacturing base has developed based on farm products that support the milling, canning, leather, and jute industries, as well as a rapidly expanding apparel-assembly sector.

About 40% of the population then lived below the international poverty line of US$1.25 a day. The poverty is deep and widespread with the UN describing the 40% of the population as "ultra-poor". The economy was still primarily based on subsistence agriculture, especially livestock although drought had decreased agricultural activity. I understand the extreme inequality in the distribution of income remains a major drawback. Food output has been hit by the deaths from Aids of farmers. Lesotho has one of the world's highest rates of HIV-Aids infection. Significant levels of child labour also exist.

The land is made up mostly of highlands where many of the villages can be reached only by foot, on horseback, or by light aircraft. During the winter shepherds wearing only boots and wrap-around blankets have to contend with deep snow. While much of the tiny country with spectacular canyons and thatched huts remains untouched by modern machines, developers have laid down roads to reach its mineral and water resources. Major construction work has been under way in recent years to create the Lesotho Highlands Water Project to supply South Africa with fresh water. Otherwise it appears that the former government of South Africa was content to let it fester in poverty rather than absorb it.

From an Irish perspective this little country has been a major recipient of Irish aid ever since one of our better Taoisigh, Garrett FitzGerald, met with its Foreign Minister on his way to speak at the United Nations. Strangely and I suppose as a result, Irish aid dwarfs any other aid being provided by another donor. The range of
supports provided has covered mainly economic and educational development but has extended to the use of Connemara ponies for breeding stock to invigorate and strengthen the existing livestock.

Initially, there was good reason for such levels of support – for any support. The country was a front line state in the international movement against apartheid then the law in South Africa. Given the alternating and radical nature of the country’s politics being fought out between the various elite groups and the absence of an explicit and defined and government supported pro-poor agendas the original rationale in my opinion has become somewhat less relevant. On the other hand donors including Irish Aid could consider further a direct linking of their funding support to the government’s pro-poor policies aimed at changing the system and improving the lot of the marginalised and largely forgotten poor.

In fairness to Irish Aid the recent OECD and similar third party reports of its activities are generally complimentary. Incidentally and up until fairly recently Ireland has made good progress in achieving the target of converting 0.7% of Irish GDP to international aid programmes. There was a strong empathy between Ireland with its colonial past and a policy of non-interference and a sense that the beneficiary country’s government knows best. I’m sure with the current degree of integration between all EU aid agencies coupled to the current recession and with some interesting experiences of their own amongst the respective EC donor agencies that
these earlier approaches may have been somewhat modified – hopefully not too drastically.

Lesotho lies atop an escarpment called the Drakensberg. Most of the country is mountainous, with elevations ranging from 2,000 m (6,000 ft) to 3,482 m (11,424 ft). The Maloti spurs, shown here, run from the south to the north, where they join another range to form a plateau that is the source of southern Africa's largest rivers. The Maloti Mountains provide beautiful scenery, but their soils have suffered extensive erosion.

More than 80% of Irish funding used to go to sub-Saharan Africa where our programmes and partnerships mean that millions more families have food to eat, schools for their children and access to life-saving drugs. Incidentally, I note somewhere the OECD describes Ireland as a generous donor, a genuine partner and a champion at making our aid work effectively. It also concluded that “we lead the way in HIV/AIDS and leverage our strong international standing to lobby for gender equality and a fairer deal for developing countries”. Over the last six years Ireland has spent €4 billion on overseas assistance and even after the reduction to the recent budgets we remain the sixth highest donor in the world in per capita terms. That is an extraordinary feat for a country of our size.

I participated on two missions to Lesotho. The earlier one in 1993 was as team leader for a World Bank financed study of future national options for technical education and vocational training. Later I was directly appointed by Irish Aid as Team Leader ostensibly for the evaluation of an Irish VET project. A separate part of my terms of reference for which I was required to sign the Irish Official Secrets Act covered an assessment of a building financed by Irish Aid which had been criticised as below standard and unsafe. I’ll return to the latter a little later.

For the World Bank study I was appointed by the Higher Education for Development Co-operation (HEDCO) an amalgam of the Irish universities. This was at a time when consultancies were in short supply. We transferred at Johannesburg from our plane to a small twin-engined aircraft to fly to Lesotho. We’d had our breakfast when
about half way into the journey we hit an air pocket and the plane suddenly dropped several hundred feet. Most of our breakfasts came back again and we landed somewhat shaken. It was a dramatic introduction to land with breakfast and vomit staining our clothes.

I was accompanied by two Irish colleagues. From the start they both made it clear to me that they strongly objected to my being in charge. All of us being Irish and known to each other: we often grated. Ever since that experience I’ve always admired the EU approach to bring together a mixture of nationalities on mission. The latter approach avoids tensions and class distinctions which are not so obvious with a team of mixed nationalities. Anyway I was lumbered with the two of them. A further distinction arose from their claims to be convinced Trotskyites. When they first made this revelation I laughed as I thought that that era was long past. Anyway, my own father’s credentials were fairly strong in that area. But they were deadly serious.

Under normal circumstances I would have laughed and shrugged it off. But I had to live with it and try to work together with them. Others didn’t and there were so many complaints received back by HEDCO in Ireland that they asked me to stay an extra week after the others had departed to settle such ruffled feathers as there were. I confess in the field I found them introverted and not easily able to relate to the beneficiaries. They sought to bring some pressure on particular items of the final report. It was difficult at times.

Looking back the mission proved to be an interesting fact finding experience. We split the work up between us and attempted to cover the most important stakeholders as best we could. In one location I was taken to view the footprints of dinosaurs – I think it was somewhere close to the Drakensberg Mountains. Negotiating and reaching agreements between the different religious persuasions was quite a sensitive
exercise. We had to tread lightly as the various denominations were quick to assert their territorial - not to speak of their confessional claims.

The weight of the water diverted into this reservoir by the Katse Dam of Lesotho caused minor earthquakes and damaged houses in surrounding villages. The dam, which is 182 meters high, represents the first phase of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project.

We travelled occasionally to Bloemfontein in the nearby Orange Free State. It had many associations with the Boer War. I passed various Kopje used as viewing points or for mounting ambushes by the Boers. In Bloemfontein I bought the Boer War history written by Lord Longford in a bookshop in Bloemfontein and found it useful in building up some degree of understanding of the local black sensitivities arising from about two hundred years of domination by the white man; whether the British or the Boers.

All in all it’s another part of the world I’d enjoy returning to. After the final presentation and the colleagues had left I came home via Cape Town where I spent a couple of days taking in the beautifully converted Waterfront along with a visit to the Cape of Good Hope or the Cape of Storms – depending on weather conditions and your personal preferences. I didn’t see any whales but I enjoyed the journey through the Twelve Apostle Mountains and Simonstown the naval port in False Bay. I visited the huge supermarket in Killarney, a suburb of Capetown and made an unforgettable trip along the wonderful wine route from Stellenbosch to Constantia, a village set in a wine-producing area above Capetown. The only downside was that I was there just before Christmas when the weather was on the hot side of moderate.

I was back in Lesotho about twelve months later to work directly for Irish Aid. I was to carry out an evaluation of some training programmes. More interestingly and as noted earlier above I was to make an assessment from my building background of the new HQ of the Lesotho Technical and Vocational Education and Training Organisation which had been built for them by Irish Aid. The building had been fiercely criticised by a locally-based Irish architect. Prior to my departure on mission
I was required to sign the Official Secrets Act on the only occasion I have had to do anything like that in a lifetime of consulting. I was intrigued.

The person in charge of the construction was a Lesothan engineer who had been professionally educated by Irish Aid under a scholarship to Bolton Street College, my old alma mater. The main criticism centred over the weak concrete mix used which resulted in the building not being fit for purpose. Cement is expensive right across the developing world and contractors and engineers always are attracted to the possibility of fiddling savings on its use - which invariably goes into their back pockets. Another amusing criticism had to do with the diversion of sewage pipes laid earlier to carry away the faeces of the king’s cows. Their accommodation was located higher up on a hill directly overlooking the new HQ.

Aid agencies are always sensitive – extremely sensitive – to criticism or especially to anything in this case which might ultimately find its way into discussion in either House of the Irish Parliament hence I suppose the requirement to sign the Act. The whole site had been closed down and boarded up while the people in Irish Aid back in Dublin decided what to do with it.

With an architect from the Irish Board of Works I climbed over the fence one evening to survey the building. We were spotted and reported to the complainant. It was our opinion that with the factor of safety normally used and with transfer of the library from the first to the ground floor to save weight that the building was usable. When we reported this back to the authorities in Dublin rather than keep the building I understand they decided to demolish it and build a new one. The locally based architect had had his way. It was all done somewhat low key.
The Irish expatriate community enjoyed themselves. It was difficult to turn away the invitations to partying every weekend. During the high jinks at one such party I along with several others was tossed into the swimming pool as a form of inauguration. A couple of years later when my brother was visiting Lesotho he was regaled with a story of the incident.

There was a dark side to local relations. I worked well with the Director of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Organisation and his colleagues. Given his position he had his bureaucratic requirements and he appreciated any way I could help him. We went out to dinner together a couple of times. Then some months after I had returned home I was shocked to learn that he and a colleague had been cruelly murdered on their way home from work one evening. Sadly, this wasn’t at all unusual. He must have angered somebody important. May he rest gently.

**South Africa: My impressions over the years**

I think I first made a visit to South Africa sometime before the end of apartheid in the early to mid 1990s. I had as noted been working in Maseru, Lesotho, and on weekends we would travel clandestinely without visas to shop and relax in nearby Bloemfontein. The contrast between impoverished Lesotho and the richness of the vast South African farms which stretched as far as the eye could see with prosperous towns, heliports, and all the accoutrements of an advanced agricultural and privileged society was impressive. It made me as a visiting white man somewhat uneasy and somewhat resentful that people of the white European races would dominate and exploit the local black peoples.
South Africa then was and continues to be in a post-apartheid era the engine of sub-Saharan Africa. The shopping malls such as the one in Killarney, a suburb of Capetown, resembled more the US than Europe in terms of scale and shopping opportunities. Circumstances for the whites have certainly changed to some degree post-apartheid and since I first visited South Africa. Earlier, I was approached on a couple of occasions to know whether I had sailing connections back in Europe who could be interested in purchasing South African manufactured yachts. This was but just one way South African whites then had for transferring or laundering their funds from South Africa to Europe and the US. More recently, I was both surprised and taken aback to see whites begging in the same streets of Bloemfontein.

I and a colleague hired a car and drove around the area close to Cape Town, including the wine route, Constantia, Stellenbosch and the Cape of Good Hope - all of which were remarkably beautiful. Swimming in both places there was a difference of 4° in sea temperature between False Bay and the Atlantic coast off Cape Town: False Bay being fed from the Indian Ocean currents, while the sea west of Cape Town was part of the South Atlantic Ocean.

That first time there was always a threat of violence. One evening, coming back from False Bay we had a puncture driving through Crossroads, a suburb of Cape Town. There the trees had all been levelled to provide the South African Police with a clearer line of fire in the event of civic commotion, which was not uncommon. Somewhat nervously we changed the tyre and then continued unmolested on our way.

Since that first visit, which included a tour of the Western Cape I have been at least twice involved in missions to the country. One was to make an evaluation with my Dutch colleague of funds provided by the Dutch government for higher education. The Dutch have long had strong connections with the country through the Boer
settlement, which I have often been assured by Dutch colleagues originated from the less respectable elements of 17th century Netherlands Society.

Cape baboons inspect us on the way out to the Lighthouse.

In making our evaluation, we soon came to the conclusion that the academics and the exchanges from the Netherlands to South Africa, and vice versa, were greatly enjoyed and appreciated by the academicians themselves. Everywhere we visited we received glowing terms of the progress, academic and otherwise, which had been achieved under the relatively small €7 million programme. Hard facts were not so easy to come by, but we were assured by both the academic groups involved and by the local Dutch embassy that the programme was considered to be a success.

There was one somewhat amusing incident when we sought to track down the federal South African officers responsible for third-level education nationwide. We spent an inordinate amount of time making telephone calls and faxing to arrange an appropriate meeting. When we eventually got through, we found that the officers were meeting together to consider policy development issues and their location was in one of the very affluent holiday resorts in the mountains, a distance from Johannesburg.

When we arrived we were greeted by bright young men and women, who immediately ordered us fairly large gins and tonics and cigars. They assured us that the funding from the Netherlands was being used to excellent effect with tremendous results. And then they invited us to join their party. I felt uneasy in attempting to bring the subject to a little more detail on what the impacts and outcomes of Dutch funding might have been. We spent approximately an hour and a half with the group without receiving any more detail for inclusion in our report. It was my opinion that the educated blacks appointed to oversee third level funding had learned quite a lot in terms of the social graces from their Dutch colleagues.

At the same time we were based in a hotel in Pretoria and there we saw something more of the realities of South African life. We were locked in to our hotel, as were all guests, from nine in the evening until eight in the morning. This we were assured was
for our safety. Our taxi driver, who accompanied us to our various meetings, carried a revolver in the glove compartment. He insisted on driving us into the compound of the various offices we were visiting in Johannesburg and on picking us up from inside the compound on conclusion of our meetings. He may well have been an extreme white. He did share with us his experiences of raiding into nearby front-line African countries under the apartheid regime which were quite bloodthirsty. On the other hand, after a wider enquiry, including enquiring from the Dutch embassy we were recommended to take his advice.

Stellenbosch: a typical Dutch traditional house in this most attractive town.

One evening after a lock-up in our hotel I noticed that there seem to be a dispute between a number of black people and a white man with an Irish accent. I enquired from him as to whether he was Irish, and he replied that he was and a senior officer of the University of Limerick and was down in South Africa to negotiate an EC project for establishing free trade areas based on the Shannon (Ireland) model but attached to various technological institutes across South Africa. He advised that in the post-apartheid situation and even under Nelson Mandela there was fierce, black on black conflict, which he had not expected.

I stayed in contact with him and was invited down to Limerick and sat in on several of the subsequent meetings in relation to the project. I helped, as part of the project group subsequently to prepare a SWOT analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which could be expected from the University of Limerick’s participation in the proposed programme.

The other occasion I recall was several years later, when because of objections from the EC Delegation there in relation to a report prepared on local economic development for the Limpopo region prepared by one of my colleagues I was requested to see what I could do to improve it. I enjoyed working with the personnel
of the Delegation and with the local South African consultant even if there was a bit of pressure. Luckily, much of the work had been done and I had just to search for and apply a reasonable structure to improve the clarity and the recommendations. My local colleague suggested that I take more care in looking after myself. The previous week he, a native of the country, had been held up and robbed in broad daylight. But I suppose it could happen to me here in Dublin.

Union Buildings: the seat of government and not far from my hotel in Pretoria.

My impression of the country is that it is advancing in so many positive ways. There has been a willingness to forget the injustices imposed under the apartheid regime. I think that saintly man Nelson Mandela has to be credited with much of this. He and Bishop Tutu have done major work to ensure the transition has been broadly successful. On the other hand, there is a black middle class – the Wabenzi\(^2\) - which also has made a significant contribution. Success in this transition can be expected to have a major impact on the development of sub-Saharan Africa. There have been many obstacles to be overcome, not least the failure to recognise the need to grapple with the scourge of HIV AIDS, but overall elections are free, there is broad participation in the electoral process, the Rand has not dived too far and the country's infrastructure, industrial and physical, continues to be developing and expanding.

I keep the best for last: the Western Cape has to be the most beautiful country I know. Cape Town and its Waterfront Complex, the area down to the Cape of Good Hope, with the Twelve Apostles Mountains and Simonstown are all stunning.

\(^2\) The tribe driving Mercedes-Benz cars.
Swaziland's most well-known cultural event was the annual Reed Dance (Incwala Ceremony). To the outsider it is all somewhat bizarre and a throwback from the bad old times. Certainly for me large parts of it appeared to have a lot to do with the male virility and insatiable appetites of successive Kings of Swaziland. I’m advised that Incwala is best translated as 'Kingship Ceremony': it is often given in English as 'first fruits ceremony', but the King's tasting of the new harvest is only one aspect among many in this long, and to the westerner, somewhat dubious pageant. Locally it is high treason for any other person but the King of Swaziland to hold this event.

In "umcwasho" as the custom was known all young girls were placed in a female age-regiment. After a number of years, when the girls had reached a marriageable age, they would perform labour service for the Queen Mother, ending with dancing and feasting. But if any of the girls became pregnant outside of marriage, her family paid a fine of one cow to the local chief. Interestingly, the country remained under the official chastity rite of "umchwasho" until as recently as 2005.

The key figures are the King, Queen Mother, royal wives and children, the royal governors (indunas), the chiefs and the regiments. In an eight day ceremony eligible girls first cut reeds and present them to the queen mother. This entitles them to participate in the ceremonials. It is said to be the most important cultural event in

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3 I remember the term used was “fell pregnant”.
Swaziland and is held on the fourth day after the full moon nearest the longest day, December 21. I was informed that every Swazi may take part in the public parts of the Incwala, especially the climax on the fourth day. The royal family appoints a commoner maiden to be "induna" (captain) of the girls and she announces over the radio the dates of the ceremony. Apparently, the official aims of the ceremony if you could believe them, are to:

- Preserve girls' chastity
- Provide tribute labour for the Queen mother, and
- Produce solidarity by having the ladies working together.

It was most important apparently that the girl captain should be an expert dancer and knowledgeable on royal protocol. One of the King's daughters would be her counterpart. Another highlight of the Dance – a most sinister one - I learned is where the King of Swaziland invites girls graduating from secondary school to attend a very ostensibly social occasion. His intent is to select a wife or wives from the group of eligible girls presented to him. This isn’t a one-off event. It takes place annually.

My basis for working in Swaziland was far removed from these ‘strange ceremonials’. It was to attempt to repair relationships between members of an EC team involved on an education project and to re-focus and seek to achieve an amicable settlement and a useful project result. I remember the long discussions and interminable arguments between members of the team.

In the evenings, my local Swaziland colleagues and I occasionally socialised together. I remember on one occasion bringing up the issue of the Reed Dance with them. The educated women I was dealing with would have no hand, act, or part of this and were extremely adept in secreting away their daughters and in avoiding confrontation with the procurer sent to their houses by the King. The methods they used were quite devious. They certainly were unanimous in strongly condemning their men folk for not taking a more active role in terminating this tradition. That such a process could continue in this day and age nonplussed me.

Lying in East Africa Tanzania is bordered by Kenya and Uganda to the north, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west, and Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique to the south. The country's eastern borders lie on the Indian Ocean. Most of my work was concentrated in the Greater Dar es Salaam (Haven of Peace) area as well as up and down the coast with occasional forays inland. I had the opportunity to visit Zanzibar on several occasions.

The name Tanzania is a combination of the names of Tanganyika and Zanzibar after the two states united in 1964 to form the United Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar which later the same year was renamed the United Republic of Tanzania. The union of the two, hitherto separate, regions was controversial among many Zanzibaris (even...
those sympathetic to the revolution) but was accepted by both the Nyerere\textsuperscript{4} government and the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar owing to shared political values and goals. The size of the country is immense. It is the world's 31st-largest country. It comes after Egypt and is comparable in size to Nigeria.

The city centre of Dar has many remains of its German period. There are the government buildings, the warehouses, and especially a variety of churches all dating from that time. At the centre of the city is the harbour or Haven of Peace where the ships come in to discharge their cargoes. The railway line connecting on to Zambia had been damaged, and under threat during the Zimbabwean War. Happily it is again in operation.

\begin{center}
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I always found it somewhat quixotic politically that while almost all the ministries are located in Dar es Salaam the commercial capital since 1996, the official capital of Tanzania has been Dodoma, where the parliament and some government offices are located. It sometimes reminded me of the European Union and the rotation of the Parliament between Brussels and Strasbourg which I still find to be illogical. Dar es Salaam universally referred to as “Dar” is the major seaport for the country and its landlocked neighbours.

The country is mountainous in the northeast, where Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, is situated. To the north and west are the Great Lakes of Lake Victoria (Africa's largest lake) and Lake Tanganyika (Africa's deepest lake, known for its unique species of fish). Central Tanzania comprises a large plateau, with plains and arable land. The eastern coast is hot and humid, with the island of Zanzibar lying just offshore. The country contains many large and ecologically significant wildlife parks, including the famous Ngoro Ngoro Crater, Serengeti National Park in the north, and Selous Game Reserve and Mikumi National Park in the south.

\textsuperscript{4} Julius Nyerere was an international senior statesman and like Nelson Mandela was revered across Africa during his lifetime.
Driving on roads through the many parks offers the chance to come unexpectedly to see a large variety of wild animals including lions, zebra giraffes and elephants. This adds considerably to the excitement. Not so long ago a lioness and her cubs strolled through the select white expatriate suburb of Oyster Bay in Dar.

The country was formerly a German colony from the 1880s through to 1919. Happenings during the First World War and the roles of the Tanzanian Askari soldiers under German officers are well documented in the book “The Ice-cream War”. The post-World War I Accords and the League of Nations charter designated the area a British Mandate (except for a small area in the northwest, which was ceded to Belgium and later became Rwanda and Burundi).

British rule came to an end in 1961 after a relatively peaceful (compared with neighbouring Kenya, for instance) transition to independence. In 1954 Julius Nyerere transformed an organization into the politically oriented Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). Nyerere became Minister of British-administered Tanganyika in 1960 and continued as Prime Minister when Tanganyika became officially independent in 1961. Soon after independence, Nyerere's first presidency took a turn to the left after the Arusha Declaration. After the Declaration, banks were nationalised as were many large industries.

Of the countries I have visited in southern and eastern Africa, Tanzania has to be my favourite. The lifestyle is slow and laid-back. It would be easy to have a mental breakdown there were one to depart from the rule of taking it easy; being patient and not expecting miracles. The cardinal rule is always to smile. Occasionally, I or some of my expatriate colleagues would find ourselves becoming impatient or frustrated at the pace of events. Then it was necessary to remind myself of the positive things, and the fact that we were visitors and that the Tanzanians are in charge.
Against these small setbacks was the excitement of being in an immense country of many different tribes and races and religions and traditions which were all so novel to us and always in the background there seem to be echoes of Zairian sounds and a very rich and diverse set of unfamiliar tribal traditions which adds very much to the already fascinating first impressions.

I found and revelled in the laid-back way of life along with a palpable tradition of multi-racial accords between the major tribes and religious sects and with frequent inter-marriage between Christians and Muslims. This is probably due to the broad tolerance and the tradition for Muslims to limit their abstinence from alcohol consumption to the month of Ramazan. The recent economic reforms and its position as a stable political and multi-cultural entity over the past few decades have enabled Tanzania to accelerate its economic growth targets.

I fell in love with this easy, casual lifestyle. During the evenings, I would often frequent the Container Bar out somewhere on the Msasani peninsula, a suburb of Dar es Salaam, which was just that – a container on the side of the road with some stools where blacks and whites would meet to discuss the day’s events before heading home. I bought shirts from the ‘one-man bazaar’ the name given to a man strolling the streets with an array of shirts on hangers on his back. Then there were nightclubs such as the Q Club I think, where there was dancing and where blacks and whites met and mixed easily. It was marvellous to attend jazz sessions which were very popular and see how dexterously and how well Africans could dance – much, much better than the European expatriates. I never encountered any sign of racial discrimination. Indeed, it was very interesting to study the evolution of relationships between expatriates, including Irish nationals, and the local ladies. Several of these relationships have endured to my knowledge.

There was one occasion when a couple of us were invited to an Irish party on the beach. On enquiring how to get there we were told to take the ferry across the south shore, to drive for 60 km and then turn left. Unfortunately, we sank into quicksand and had to be rescued by the local villagers. They were so happy and so helpful, and all they sought in recompense were a couple of six-packs of beer.

The country has had lots of missionary links with Ireland. There is a fairly significant Irish population resident in the country between the NGOs and missionaries. IrishAid has Tanzania as one of its focus countries and the turnout on St Patrick’s Day as I saw for myself is a major occasion. Several of the senior government officials I met explained to me that they had learnt English first in the Irish missionary schools. Mr. Nyerere seemed to have a soft spot for the Irish. I believe he was educated by Irish missionaries and often visited Ireland. A practical result was that Irish nationals weren’t required to apply for visas to visit Tanzania. I used to characterise my Dutch national colleagues as “children of a lesser God” when they had to queue up at the counter to apply for them.

A place I loved to visit in Dar was the area famous for souvenirs and paintings in the Tanzanian primitive school. Perhaps I’m wrong to describe them as primitive. These paintings had such a distillation of imagination and humour and in dictating this piece on my machine I’m looking up on my office wall. There I see one depicting the Garden of Paradise and another very humorously displaying patients going to see a
witch doctor. I offered this painting to a medical friend to hang in his consulting rooms but he very politely declined. The last shows a peacock on a branch with three other peacocks without tails attempting to climb up with him. I love the humour.

Tanzania: Local native art which is often so animated and funny.

The island of Zanzibar was the ancient centre of the East African slave trade and combines so much beauty mixed with a history of so much pain. Overall, with its beach huts and its barbeques on the beach at twilight it captures the imagination as the ultimate tropical island location. Penal Island where the slaves were imprisoned prior to being sold in the Slave Market of Stonetown is so beautiful and seemed to be a most unlikely location for so much cruelty. In my opinion Stonetown itself is fairly drab; the main points of interest unfortunately are related to aspects of the gruesome slave market. But it’s a good place to buy spices.

On visits to Zanzibar I noticed I was required to present my passport at customs. This is because “there isn’t a full integration of the two countries as yet. Zanzibar's House of Representatives has jurisdiction over all non-union matters”. Zanzibar's House of Representatives can make laws for Zanzibar without the approval of the union government as long as it does not involve union-designated matters.
The semi-autonomous relationship between Zanzibar and the union is a relatively unusual system of government. The above extract from the official literature is I think something of a euphemism. During the late nineties when I was there was almost full scale rebellion at times with the Zanzibaris seeking full independence. Violence though was fairly minimal. This has to be seen in the context of a tribute to a latent tolerance existing between the two communities and hopefully continuing between the two legislatures.

We flew past snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro each time we came on mission.

The island’s rules and legislation are much stricter on things like alcohol consumption or ladies’ attire. But both could be indulged without comment in the numerous beach side resorts.

The journey to the island from Dar was by very fast hydrofoils which are worth the time saved or by conventional ferries transporting the tourists as well as the locals and their wares. I found the latter much more interesting as it gave the opportunity to observe families travelling and eating and drinking and enjoying themselves together.

Islam was spread mainly through trade activities along the East African coast, not through conquest and territorial expansion and when the violent Portuguese intrusions in the coastal areas occurred in the 16th century it was already well established there. Almost all the ruling families had ties of kinship with Arabia, Persia, India and even Southeast Asia owing to their maritime contacts and political connections with the northern and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean. By the end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th century the coastal Muslims managed to oust the Portuguese
with the help of Oman. The Omanis gradually increased their political influence until the end of the 19th century when Europeans arrived on the coast of East Africa.

During the time when the Omanis dominated the coast politically, the spread of Islam intensified in the interior of East Africa. Trade contacts with peoples in the interior gained importance and a number of towns became important centres in the ever-increasing trade in slaves and ivory. Many chiefs, even as far away as parts of Uganda converted to Islam and cooperated with the coastal Muslims. Trade served to spread not only Islam, but also the Swahili language and culture. I noted there was a strong movement politically to abandon English as the official language and to revert to Swahili which is widely used by the countries along the Indian Ocean.

The Project

In 1997, we were appointed to provide support to the Government of Tanzania under the EC project supporting Institutional Strengthening for the Education Sector Development Programme. The project involved some sixteen short to medium-term missions. Subsequent to our appointment we learned that the donor group supporting education had a vision for education reform which was strongly at variance with that of the government.

Government officials at the highest senior level informed us later in confidence that we had been selected because we had no prior experience of education in Tanzania. In determining our appointment, the government had overridden the recommendations of the donor group, and especially of one EC official who had expected his private company would have been successful.

\[^{5} \text{In a small world the Omani influence reached northwards across the Persian Gulf into Balochistan in present-day Pakistan. Until comparatively recently the Balochi shared Omani citizenship.}\]
As the consulting group selected by the government we were explicitly told by the Minister and his Permanent Secretary to have nothing to do with the 50 or 60 foreign consultants who staked out the headquarters of the Education Ministry and who supported their civil service favourites and generally sought to impose their view on the way education should be reformed. Our initial impression was that it was very unfair that a Ministry should be subjected to such a degree of pressure by donors and their consultants. We were impressed when the Ministry rejected all of the documentation prepared by the foreign consultants. Naturally enough we kept our feelings ‘sotto voce’.

We were most happy to comply and subsequently to turn down invitations to meetings of the consultants and donors. It put a strain on our relationship with European Commission. Our defence was that we are carrying out the explicit instructions of the Minister and his Permanent Secretary. To do otherwise would be to put pressure on our relations with the Ministry and to run the risk of the Ministry’s rejection of the professional contribution we had been mobilised to make by the EC. For a period of the contract and its extension into 2000 we developed a close positive relationship of trust with our colleagues in the Ministry.

Looking back I like to think our advice was useful and that it did provide a platform for the implementation of several much-needed reforms. I suppose it also provoked a degree of jealousy amongst the donor group. However with sixteen independent donor agencies most of them European and the often level of bickering amongst them our relationship with individual donor organisations could be fraught on occasion.
They were certainly many, many funny incidents. At one location I was making a presentation to the Ministry officials at large when one of them turned to a colleague and asked, “Is he a politician?” She became alarmed and asked another team member, who was sitting beside me to tell me to end my presentation as quickly as possible. He took her at her word and indicated to me in an unmistakable and physical way to sit down quickly, which I did.

Another time, in making a presentation to the government and the donors a colleague had kindly agreed to pace my presentation with a display of the Power Point overheads we had prepared. In speaking, I sometimes got taken away and went down a cul-de-sac and jumped a few overheads. There were delays and always good-natured criticism and laughter before we got back again on track.

Then we worked together with a white South African professor, who although small had quite an inflated ego. The team including the South African shared a large Swedish apartment together. On one occasion the professor condescendingly advised my Dutch colleague that he had had several Dutch girlfriends. She looked at him coldly and remarked “you're too small”. I wondered how we were all going to get on together after that.

I was introduced to H.E. the President of Tanzania during a reception in his Palace. Our photograph was taken and he very kindly invited me to the Palace to collect it the following day. My driver was heavily dubious to take me into the Palace the next day and he was right. Having surprised the Presidential Guard on the way in they were waiting for us on our way out. Sad to say he was roughed up by the Guard when we couldn’t show our invitation but then we were let go.

We also shared the apartment block with a Swedish family. The husband was a statistician and he and our team would work together setting out targets and budgets.
and the like. It was often very hot and humid and I very well remember my embarrassment on one occasion when his wife opened the door and found her husband and I quite informally dressed working on a paper. She was most impressed she said by the way I and the professor sucked in our tummies.

Dar es Salaam: a coastal craft lateen rigged.

On the weekends, I loved to pass an evening and to see the sunset from the Slipway on the Msasani Peninsula. There was a boat yard there and it was located very close to the yacht club. The location was unique in that I was informed it was one of the few places on the East African coast where looking westward it was possible to see the sunset over the water. There were a few open-air restaurants and bars where people of all races could meet and mingle and talk.

On other occasions, the team stayed in the Oyster Bay Hotel owned by the Irish expatriate who had patented internationally the ingredient for Bailey's Irish Cream. On the first floor an open-air restaurant looked through the palms directly out on to the Indian Ocean. It was magnificent. But he had a somewhat bizarre architectural sense. A Volkswagen beetle car was nested in the branches of a giant tree close to the bedroom block. In a cage hanging from another was tethered a huge bird something like an African sea eagle. But every mission we stayed there the tariff became more and more expensive and eventually, albeit reluctantly, we had to bid farewell.

From the Oyster Bay Hotel on our way to work in the Ministry we passed by the US Embassy. This Embassy building became one of the first victims of Al Qaeda attacks when a large number of people, mainly Tanzanians, were killed in a bombing assault shortly after we left sometime in the middle or late 2000.

The climate along the coast was often difficult to bear. It can be very hot and very humid. On occasion I changed my shirt several times a day. At times also the weather could be quite treacherous. Prolonged heavy rains made the earthen roads impassable. Following heavy rains we were up-country visiting a school and preparing
recommendations for its extension and equipping. The river beside it was in full spate and as we watched we could see it washing away the earth until the school was engulfed and part of it disappeared.

One weekend the team decamped to White Sands, a resort on the coast about 50 km to the north of the city. We lived in straw roofed ron-de-val cabins in the African style. During the morning, we could stroll along the beach and buy freshly caught fish and lobster from the fishermen. I would gut and clean them and our Dutch colleague as Mission Mamma would cook them for us. In my mind's eye I can still see the lateen rigged Arab dhows sailing past close inshore.

During our time working in the Ministry we made many local African friends. One was an acknowledged education expert with PhD qualifications from Sweden. He was also a man of considerable integrity but of a somewhat testy disposition. He was often at odds with the European Commission who paid his salary as a local consultant but offended his dignity by paying him somewhat in arrears. I thought it was petty of them. Occasionally on weekends, he would take us out to his pineapple farm not far from Dar. He would regale us with the traditions of his tribe.

He explained that following the decease of a family member the body was buried under the hall door of the house until it had decomposed. When it was adjudged to have decomposed the bones were placed in a family ossuary. I respected him a lot straddling as he did proudly his own African culture as well as the Western. He spoke several African languages as well as fluent English and Swedish. I had an agreement with him that whenever I was returning to Tanzania I would bring out insulin with me for one or other of his relatives.
I once met a Dutch anthropologist who was married to Tanzanian. She had published extensively but she intrigued me when she described the traditions of one tribe to the north of Tanzania where it was customary for this tribe to have sons kill their mothers. This would happen after the death of the grandfather. Then somewhat callously at least to the Western mind the surviving grandmother was characterised as a witch probably because she was a drain on the family resources as she no longer was seen to contribute. Her sons were delegated to kill her!

I had always thought that I would have the opportunity during one of the later missions to make time to visit the Serengete Wild Life Park and the Ngoro Ngoro Crater to see all the wild life there. Sadly I wasn't able to make it but I took advantage of our missions to Tanzania to visit Entebbe in Uganda to do some promotional work with the European Commission and the other donors.

I was amazed by the air of normality about Entebbe even though its horrible history of political instability and massacre was only in the recent past. It struck me that in such places people are so anxious to pull themselves together and to forget the past – where possible. A colleague once recounted her experience of a mission to Rwanda where she was seated in a room calmly discussing education reform with people who only a year or two previously had been killing each other.

Uganda at the time was considered the model of an education reform process and the international donor community was anxious to have a part of the action. Since then it has fallen from its lofty pedestal. Things mustn’t have been all that transparent. It doesn’t get the high profile it once had and donors instead are looking towards the Far East and countries like Cambodia or even Vietnam. I made our presentations and I moved on to further fields – as much by design as necessity! Such is the life of the freelance consultant.
Chapter X

‘Down in the Caribbean – it’s not a dream you’re seeing’
and visits in the sun to Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, St Lucia, Guyana, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Suriname

I suppose most of us when we think of the Caribbean imagine glorious palm filled sunsets and blue waves crashing upon sandy beaches. Some of us - I would - might also think of a Bacardi and Coke and maybe a barbecue. That certainly has been my perception – but seriously if you go seeking there is very much more. There is a great deal of pain and suffering in the respective histories of the islands and sometimes a wretched level of survival which the tourist may never see or even may well be encouraged to overlook.

Sunset over the islands looking towards the Grenadines from St. Vincent

Apart from my first visit to Belize coming up to nearly 30 years ago I've been on two or three subsequent missions to the Caribbean - to the English-speaking islands. My next mission was to carry out an evaluation of European Union aid to the University of the West Indies (UWI) which has three campuses spread over the islands of Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. I also visited UWI's extension which provided courses in Georgetown, Guyana. That was in 1992 or twenty years ago. My more recent mission was for a little over two months based in St Vincent and the Grenadines. On both the latter occasions I spent some time on the island of St Lucia. There I had the privilege of visiting the only secondary school in the world which to my knowledge has produced two Nobel laureates.
At the conclusion of my mission to St. Vincent I took a holiday and visited the island of St Maarten, which is divided between the French and Dutch. I also visited the St Kitts and Nevis Islands. In 2007 my Dutch colleague and I found ourselves working together for the Inter-American Bank to set up and establish a Road Map for education reforms in the Dutch speaking enclave of Suriname. In passing I might say that while we were successful in drafting such a plan the local political establishment could have been a somewhat more enthusiastic about adopting it.

The modern Caribbean reflects the domination of the islands by the European powers especially in the 17th and 18th centuries. This period covered conflicts between the Dutch, the English, the Spaniards and the French mostly but not exclusively as extensions of European wars. Each of these European-based maritime power cultures has left its indelible mark. All of them and especially the British had a major role in introducing the slave trade and the misery and bestiality associated with it.

Slaves in the English islands were emancipated during the mid-early 19th century. The Dutch surprisingly given their liberal policies in recent times were even slower in following the English example. About 20 or 30 years ago the British introduced independence to their islands with a corresponding reduction in financial support subsidies. In contrast, the French established their islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique as part of Metropolitan France and in these islands you will find French signs and cafes, French gendarmes and the French tricolour. The Dutch have departed from Suriname but the Surinamese people have not left the Dutch. Half of the Suriname-born population is resident in the Netherlands. There they are renowned as footballers and have an important role including playing for the Dutch national team. It was surprising to me to meet in Suriname so many Dutch educated doctors and lawyers who have returned but who still have very close connections to other family remaining on in the Netherlands.

Slowly across these islands there has been the development of individual island cultures. The different island peoples with populations of between one and two
hundred thousand are very keen to preserve their separate political status and identities and there is surprisingly little intermingling between even the smaller states. There is CARICOM and other regional organisations and entities covering economic and education issues and the like but the impact for individuals across the islands is far from what we might expect as members of the European Union.

Populations are separated by great expanses of water and it appears they like it to be that way. That doesn't mean that they are isolated - far from it - they are quite advanced even in the smallest of the islands in using the web as a means of communicating with the outside world. I was surprised when my taxi driver in St. Vincent told me with a degree of pride that he had ordered his second-hand taxi directly from a supplier in Japan over the internet.

Initially it seems to be a very distant place with its predominantly black populations. It would appear that it could not be further away from the Irish awareness. There are some islands which still have identified Irish communities; recognisable by their surnames. I met a local black policeman by the name of James Joyce on St. Kitts. He assured me that these Irish communities existed but that traditionally they did not enjoy the best reputations across the islands because of their sense of separateness combined with a questionable reputation for law-breaking.

Up to fifty thousand Irish slaves are reckoned by historians to have been transported to the English Caribbean islands and especially to Barbados. Then there are the Black Irish of the island of Montserrat! In Barbados there is still a small community called the ‘red legs’ who were originally transported as slaves from Ireland by Cromwell and who have their separate identity. Their status amongst the minority white community is not at all high. They are seen to be outcasts.

It appears that they or white slaves generally were not a good investment. There were several slave uprisings which put pressure on the significant English investment in the sugar plantations. Instead, the solution adopted by the English slave trade was to load
their ships in Liverpool and London and Bristol with guns and clothing and trinkets and to sail them down to the West African ports and exchange them for African slaves which they transported across under hideous conditions to the Caribbean islands. There they sold off their cargoes of slaves at a high profit and loaded up valuable cargoes of sugar for the English home markets. It was from the profits of this slave trading called the ‘triangular system’ that the magnificent buildings in the cities of London, Liverpool or Bristol were financed. It’s highly ironic but during a visit to St. Kitts I saw the current sugar crop rotting in the fields.

On the other hand Irish ports traded with the Caribbean exporting meat and especially fish so that in an indirect way our forebears may also have contributed to the operation of the slave system and indirectly to have benefited from it. There are few references to these Irish slaves to be found in Irish published histories until quite recently.

It occurs to me that the Negroid skin pigment is more dominant than the white Caucasian. I was speaking to a lady in a hotel in Jamaica whose grandmother came from Belfast. She obviously had married into the Negro community over two generations. She was black but at the same time you could clearly see the sharper Caucasian features. So I early came to a conclusion that we Irish have much more in common with these Caribbean people through the contributions of our white enslaved ancestors. On another occasion in St Vincent I was asked by a black colleague could I explain where his surname Murphy originated? I told them that it was the most common Irish name and that he probably had Irish ancestors. When he pressed me for its meaning in Gaelic I think I amused him by translating it as ‘Sea Hound’.

Given the history of the slave trade along with its isolation superficially – at least - there appears to be little cultural connection attaching the islands to Africa. But this isn't really true. There were many traditions: I suppose voodoo was one, which crossed the ocean. Diet doesn't seem to have changed much in so far as one sees very obese ladies, much more than the men, everywhere. It was my experience that the women in the Caribbean community enjoy a much higher profile in administration and politics than their African sisters. I met several who were heads of government departments; some were politicians and even ministers in government. That's quite a change from what one encounters in many African countries.

In these smaller island communities politics can eat away at peoples’ souls. Politics is the big game from morning till night. It is the reason why certain families are very prominent. The politician and his/her extended family representatives are always the first to criticise and to try to do down representatives of the opposing political party. One educationalist friend of mine on St Vincent was of world stature as an education economist and policymaker but he had been associated for a short period with the previous political party. Following the election of a new government he was kept on at the request of the donor agencies but he was bypassed totally. Over several years he had become quite embittered at being rebuffed on any occasion where he tried to make a professional contribution. We as a team were very happy to have the benefit of his insights. But we had in our report to be very careful, based on his advice, to ensure that nothing was attributed to him. Later when we visited education institutions on other islands his name was often mentioned as the most professional educationalist in the region. When I asked how it could happen that such a person should be so
neglected - there was always a shrugging of shoulders. At the same time it could be amusing to negotiate and in some ways to take advantage of the political system. I'll try to explain this later when I come to describing the way our mission operated in St Vincent.

Difficult for a man to defend himself.

Finally, in terms of linkages with the international donor agencies I was surprised to note just how active a role the Canadians and Canada played throughout the Caribbean. Very many of the people I spoke to had relatives living in Canada or they themselves had lived for a time there.

The purpose of the mission to the University of the West Indies or UWI, as it is called almost universally, was to conduct an evaluation of the impact of financial support provided by the European Union under several Lome Conventions. In addition, there was also a requirement to examine the progress which had been made in rehabilitating student accommodation which had been almost totally destroyed during a recent severe hurricane.
UWI caters for all the Anglophone islands in the Caribbean region. Therefore it was essential that there was adequate housing to accommodate the students coming from the remoter islands. The whole of the Caribbean is very vulnerable to hurricanes. One can expect them during all the months with the letter ‘r’ in them. They can cause very serious infrastructural damage to the small isolated island communities. Indeed during the time I was in St Vincent there still remained extensive damaged house properties from a much earlier hurricane which had still to be repaired.

As the plane touched down at the airport of Jamaica it appeared to my English agricultural expert colleague and to me that the runway couldn't have been more than one foot above the ocean level. We held tight, landed - and our fears were groundless. But the memory remains. We were greeted by an official from the EC Delegation who brought us to meet his senior colleagues.

Personally I was much taken aback by the reception I received from the Dutch Acting Charge d’ Affaires. He was extremely critical of the Irish. My English colleague was very sympathetic to me and couldn't understand this reaction. Neither could I. All the rest of the Delegation staff members were extremely friendly and helpful. It was just this one senior officer who seemed to have a down on myself.

Sometime later I discovered the reason. A former Irish Minister of Finance had become the Irish nominee to the European Court of Auditors. As a European Auditor he and his team had not long ago arrived to undertake a detailed examination of the financial administration of the Delegation in Jamaica. Apparently, on the evening of his arrival he had courteously invited the Dutchman along with the staff of the Delegation out to dinner and gave them the impression that the Audit Team’s work to be put into operation would be easy enough for the Delegation to cope with. It would especially avoid raising sensitive issues.

Teams from the Court of Auditors had a horrendous reputation amongst the various European Delegations. I'm sure they still have. Theirs is the French confrontational approach. It is not unknown for them to confront Delegation staff members with “we know you were hiding things from us – we assure you that before we are through with you we will have taken the place apart and we will know what it is you are trying to hide”. Anyway, our Auditor made his departure and left his minions to take the Delegation apart - root and branch. Apparently there had been some serious derogation from EC operating procedures. The Dutchman was held accountable. He spent months working unpaid overtime hours gathering appropriate responses until eventually the auditors were called off. I in my innocence presented him with a target on which he could dispose some of his accumulated bile.

Otherwise, the Delegation was very kind in providing us with appropriate advice and support. There was one very handsome young French man in his early thirties. I remember my colleague waving to me for my attention. There wasn't just one beautiful local lady visitor being entertained in his office - there were three! It was obvious that the man was enjoying Jamaica.

We were introduced to the professorial board of management of the University and we made a presentation on what it was we wished to see and report on. They were extremely helpful again. They were anxious to express their appreciation for the
funding they had received from Europe. They went to some pains to explain the benefits which had accrued to the staff development and training and equipment they had received. For our part we were very happy to begin working with them and we set up arrangements and itineraries and over the next weeks we visited all of the faculties both in Jamaica and on the other island campuses.

We found the Barbados campus almost to be asleep. Everybody was very happy and no one seemed to think that it might be necessary to improve lecture delivery or throughput targets. To the contrary we were advised of the necessity of doing this by one of the Delegation officials, a John Appleby, who was extremely helpful as well as pleasant to us. Sadly he subsequently was transferred to Papa New Guinea where he was murdered; being thrown from a third-storey balcony. In a small world and when later I was on a mission to Papa New Guinea I was given the full details of the unfortunate incident.

John Appleby jokingly asked us whether we had heard about the nuclear reactor which had been provided to the Jamaica campus as part of agricultural support? We certainly had not heard of this. He went on to explain with a smile on his face that the reason he knew about it was because of the concern expressed by the American CIA to have such a nuclear reactor so close to the U.S. coast. Certainly, during our inspections of the Jamaica campus we had seen rabbit hutches and all sorts of agricultural machinery and farm buildings, which my colleague had recognised and about which I had no idea.

Appleby had let the cat out of the bag. We couldn't and anyway didn't want to ignore this. On our return to Jamaica with the involvement of the EC Delegate there was a confrontation with the UWI Board of Management. Prior to the confrontation, the EC Delegate had requested - even directed us - to give the Board members a severe dressing down for the way they had misled the Delegation. We emphasised to the Board of Management that we felt it was a breach of trust for a nuclear reactor, however small it was, to be described as an element of agricultural equipment. All in all it was somewhat surreal. The Delegate afterwards explained that he couldn't do this much as he would like to have done because he had to continue working with the Board members. The Board members on their part were extremely contrite and polite. Eventually we found a way, a formula of words, to justify the purchase. We were also supplied with the necessary wide range of official assurances regarding nuclear non-proliferation, security, and every other protection one might imagine.

It was in Jamaica that for the first time I encountered the local radio service being widely used as a medium for distance teaching. UWI provided lectures across to even the most isolated of the English-speaking Caribbean islands. These lectures were backed up by seminars and exercises completed by the respective students. I think that the subjects taught had a lot to do with agriculture and basic science. Certainly, we were both as a team impressed at what we came across.

In making our itinerary from Jamaica to Barbados and Trinidad we found that we and our local colleagues were inevitably tracking the cricket matches between the English cricket team and the West Indians - or the "Windies" as they are affectionately known. We were informed so often from all sides that in all the English Caribbean islands the only two institutions that worked effectively - were UWI and the Windies!
Certainly, Jamaica has lots for the tourist. While on the one hand, there was colour and music and the people were extremely friendly and spontaneous - on the other hand, we were advised to look after our security. We knew that as white skinned people we would stand out very prominently and possibly attract some undesirables. We were advised to be indoors by nightfall. Being young this was an injunction that we didn't always follow. On one occasion I was shopping during the late evening when I heard someone shout “Whitey, I'm a coming to get ya” – or something similar. When I looked around I saw a deranged man coming after me with a bottle in his hand. I ran very fast into a supermarket check-in and escaped.

On another occasion, we were staying in the beautiful family hotel called, I think, the Four Seasons where we met another group of consultants. Among them was the then bursar of University College Cork. We thought that with about a half dozen of us we'd be safe enough. We decided to go to one of the better restaurants. Later, we made our way home on foot in the dark to the hotel. We became a bit anxious when we heard the footsteps of several people following us and catching up. Someone whispered “I don't like this - let's run”. Then the older bursar announced that he couldn't run. With running as an option ruled out I made the decision that “We'd better negotiate!” It turned out that we were being followed by some four or five ladies who were anxious to entertain us. We all were aware that they could well have their escorts with knives somewhere in the vicinity. We negotiated a twenty dollar note as an advance payment, but explained we were too tired on that particular night. We arranged for another night. The ladies were quite happy with this. Thus, we bought our way out of trouble. There was no repeat. I suppose while we lacked somewhat for dignity we did reach home safely.

Overall, with its flowers and bougainvillea and music I enjoyed Kingston very much although I confess I was a little bit edgy following on my experience with the man and his bottle. To the north of the island of Jamaica there was and still is Montego Bay an internationally renowned tourist area. I was advised that for safety reasons it
was completely fenced off and isolated from the rest of the island. Obviously, personal security was seen to be a major issue in successfully developing the tourist industry. As a team we received numerous invitations to come sailing or scuba-diving, but unfortunately, we just didn't have time to indulg in it.

We also made the acquaintance of a young Irish lecturer who showed us around some very interesting places. We sat out at night with him and his colleagues discussing the purpose of our mission while being provided with quite interesting insights into what worked and what didn't work so well. This is always the way that missions evolve. There is the official response, and then there are the concerns people you meet have who are looking for change and improvement and are quite generous in sharing their views. In following up on the hurricane damage I also had the pleasure of meeting a number of representatives of the local Jamaican architectural and quantity surveying community. It was interesting to see that already then and some years ahead of Ireland they had adopted a Computer Aided Design (CAD) system for construction. So confident were they as a sector with it that they had decided they would stay with the software version they had rather than attempt to upgrade it to the latest version and so avoid the confusion they feared might arise from changing to it.

This all happened during nineteen ninety two. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. Jamaica has thrived and has evolved into a regional centre for education and technical development and good practice.

Our next stop was Barbados - a small highly populated island. Barbados is one of the Caribbean's leading tourist destinations and is one of the most developed islands in the region with a Human Development Index number of 0.825. In 2011 Barbados ranked second in the Americas (16th globally) on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

There we stayed in a hotel on the beach outside the town of Bridgetown. The walls of the hotel were painted pink, and everywhere it was adorned with bougainvillea and flowers. The island is small and round. There are no hills. I was somewhat disappointed with it. I was even more disappointed returning to it in 2006 when I was required to report to the Delegation in Barbados on the work we have done in St Vincent. It certainly had developed as to be unrecognisable from the place we visited in nineteen ninety two. There are hotels everywhere. There is little direct access for the locals to the coast but through one or other of these super-modern hotels. At the same time Barbados is the commercial capital of the region so I suppose the inhabitants put up with it.

In contrast Trinidad has a distinctly nautical air about it. It was colourful. The university campus staff felt themselves to be at least on a par with the Jamaican headquarters. We visited many of the agricultural facilities and concluded that, all in all, again a good job had been done.

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6 Quoted from Wickpedia.
I visited a pub called the Pelican. I think it is one of the favourites in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Trinidad. I was surprised to see chalked on the black painted ceiling of the bar a note to record that the Malahide, Co. Dublin, cricket team had enjoyed a great reception there. I also had a message to deliver to a nurse friend of an Irish friend of mine who was living on the island of Tobago which is a short distance from Trinidad.

From Trinidad we flew down to Guyana, formerly British Guyana on the South American mainland. I found it to be much more backward - in fact, very, very underdeveloped, as compared to the Caribbean islands. Guyana is the land of Demerara sugar. Before I actually saw the great river which was between a mile and two miles wide I had no idea that the Demerara was actually a river. I was also very excited to learn that not so many miles to the west through the jungle was the border with Brazil.

We left the airport and got into a taxi for the capital city, Georgetown. It was simply the oldest and most dilapidated taxi I had ever been driven in. It had huge fibreglass
patches all over the bodywork. An all-American gas guzzler I wondered would it take us over a country road through the forests by night to our destination. The driver assured us that it would and that he took passengers to and from the airport several times a day. We got in and he entertained us with anecdotes and songs based on experiences he had been through as we sped along the dark jungle roads.

During the 17th century Guyana had been colonised by the Dutch. All along the coast when crossing smaller rivers we came across their old lifting bridges. Their successors are to be seen today all over the Netherlands. But these were somewhat rickety and neglected. Under a peace settlement entered into somewhere or another Guyana had been ceded to the British. The British in turn had imposed their own mark upon the landscape with the importation of indentured labour drawn from what is now India and Pakistan. Having had some experience of Pakistan. I found it strange to see the memorials to Muslim saints with their green and black ribbons. Later I was to encounter many more of such settlements when I worked for a while in neighbouring Suriname.

While these latter-day Indian peoples had obviously preserved memories of their saints along with some other cultural traditions there were also seen to have been some departures from earlier practices. Huge amounts of rum were being consumed in sheebeens situated along the road; set up in old metal containers or shacks. It was somewhat disturbing to see the high levels of indulgence by both men and women when we stopped by some of these sheebeens as we travelled across the countryside.

Georgetown is unique in that it is a city whose old centre consists of buildings constructed of entirely white-hart hardwood. It is the same hardwood which is used internationally in harbour construction and offers high protection against water-borne
beetle attack. It was amazing to see the walls and arches of timber construction, forming enormously high spires in the local cathedral. In terms of entertainment once again we were admonished to stay in at night and that Georgetown was even more dangerous. And this time we took advice and stayed indoors at the expense of being good tourists.

The Demerara River is really striking. It is fast flowing and presents a huge natural barrier. I recall crossing the maybe 5 kilometre wide river in an old steam engined ferry and enjoying myself enormously. Crossing the rivers we saw the local people going about their various businesses in small canoes and ribs. I remember chatting to a young man smiling happily and proud of the huge fish he had caught.

The protocols observed between the European Delegations in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad were somewhat peculiar. As the mission was about to leave Jamaica I undertook to provide the Dutchman with three copies of the mission's preliminary findings. I did it on the assumption that he would distribute a copy each Barbados and Trinidad. He replied ‘under no circumstances’. So instead of a simple posting of the documents he insisted that it was standard EC procedure that I should send the three documents to Brussels where they would be distributed individually to the three Delegations. Perhaps, the Delegations and their staffs have learned something from the fierce independence and desire for remoteness which is a feature of the island populations.
St. Vincent and the Grenadines or SVG as it is more normally known is an archipelago of 34 islands and islets located in the Eastern Caribbean. They are situated in the Lesser Antilles Island arc in the southern portion of the Windward Islands, which lie at the southern end of the eastern border of the Caribbean Sea where the latter meets the Atlantic Ocean.

St. Vincent, the mainland, has an area of 133 sq. miles, while the Grenadine Islands which run for forty miles to its southwest have a total of 17 sq. miles. The Grenadines consist of a number of privately and state-owned islands with Bequia, Mustique, Canouan, Mayreau, Union and Palm Islands and Petit St. Vincent being inhabited. To the north of Saint Vincent lies Saint Lucia, to the east Barbados. The country has a French and British colonial history. Most of the nation lies within the Hurricane Belt. It is a densely populated country with over 300 inhabitants/km² and a total of 120,000 with most of the people found on the main island. Its capital is Kingstown, also its main port. The majority of the population (approx. 67%) is under the age of 30 years. While miniscule in terms of population it has all that panoply of much larger independent state.

Kingston, the capital of the island with a cruise ship moored alongside. It’s a small town of 10,000 population and 2 or 3 bars. Bequia, the largest of the Grenadines is in the background: Wikipedia.

The north of the island consists of an active volcano. From Kingston in the south the roads follow the coast to the east and the west but terminate on the lower slopes of the

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7 Information courtesy of Wickipedia.
volcano. Thus however small the island may be there are problems in seeing it in its entirety. We did make some excursions on weekends. We visited the film set of ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ and marvelled at what appeared to be genuine, 17th and 18th century houses and furniture but which revealed themselves to be supported by frameworks of rolled steel joists and cast-iron.

For me the most interesting feature of St Vincent was undoubtedly the Botanical Gardens. I regret very much that I didn't have a camera when I visited them. The gardens are the oldest botanical gardens in the Western Hemisphere being founded in 1765. It was here that Captain Bligh of the Mutiny on the Bounty landed the breadfruit he had shipped from Fiji for landowners to propagate. The cheap prolific bounty of the breadfruit trees was used to feed the slaves on the island at minimal expense to the slave owners.

There is simply a fascinating range of plants that I had never encountered before. There were plants which gave off a range of beautiful perfumes along with plants producing a range of exotic dyes, and finally there were individualistic plants that dominated our attention. I suppose the one that impressed me most was the tree that gave off cannonball type explosions during the night as it released its seedlings. Perhaps in the next years during my retirement I’ll be able to dedicate a proportion of my time studying these wonderful plants and hopefully I'll be able to lay hands on a publication relating to those botanical Gardens.

The economy of St Vincent is highly dependent on agriculture - mainly bananas - as its main source of income. The growth in tourism has made that industry the current high income generator. There are vulnerabilities given the country's dependence on imported oil, the erosion of trade preferences in bananas, and frequent natural disasters. It has been identified as having the highest levels of poverty in the
OECS. It also has a high level of income inequality. Recent studies focusing on the social sector and, by extension, poverty suggest a worsening of the poverty levels with more and more people at risk of being driven into the poverty bracket. A recent sociological review has identified social challenges related to “family life and by extension society continue to be troubled by absentee fathers, domestic violence, teenage motherhood, child abuse and child truancy”.

The majority of the young population has only been educated to primary school level and the adult population and the majority of the existing workforce also suffers from inadequate schooling. There are serious deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills which impact on the ability of many persons to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Our mission had three elements. The primary objective of the first part of the consultancy was to provide decision-makers in the Government of St Vincent and the Grenadines and the European Commission with sufficient information to justify the acceptance, modification or rejection of a project proposal for education. The required first output of the consultancy was a Sector Review comprised of a report reviewing the status of implementation of the Education Sector Development Project (ESDP) with a proposed / updated implementation schedule.

The second task of the mission was to prepare an updated Institutional Master Plan for the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College. The third was the provision for the Government of a conclusive concept / strategy as well as a comprehensive implementation plan for improving education through the use of an
ICT project, taking into account potential factors, issues and arrangements that are pertinent to the project’s successful execution. Finally, the mission was to prepare the financing proposal for improving the quality and efficiency of education through the use of computers project. So we certainly had our hands full for the two months or so we were based on the island.

The mission took place during the autumn of 2007, I think. Once again, it was to evaluate EC investments in education and to come up with a proposal agreed with the government for a further five years of EC support. There were three of us, the architect for the mission and a Dutch man, an old friend who would look after IT aspects and with me as team leader. We based ourselves in the Cobblestones Hotel in Kingston. The hotel faced out onto the ocean and there was always a fresh breeze to reduce the impact of the heat and humidity. We were in the centre of the town and had easy access to government departments, to shops, to the only pub worthy of the name and to the couple of restaurants, which about covers the whole inventory of Kingston.

Our counterparts were two large ladies indeed. The first was the Minister of Education. She dominated the Ministry. She had a good relationship to the Prime Minister. She had in addition very firm views on how to treat consultants such as ourselves. I suppose it would be best summed up by “Take their money – and tell them nothing”. I wouldn't say she was an intellectual but she struck me that by her sheer doggedness and a strong personality she was accustomed to getting her way. She once confided to me that after her children had passed through school she had lost a great deal of interest in education – but not with the political perks - I surmised. She had a reasonably good relationship with another lady we had to report to. This was the National Authorising Officer. This lady was a senior official in the government and
very close - at least for the beginning - to the Prime Minister. She was an articulate and intelligent woman, and I did my best to build up a good relationship with her. I confess I had lost hope with the Minister of Education.

Then, finally there was the Prime Minister. He was one of two persons on the island with a Ph.D. The other was his niece with whom I worked closely. His niece was highly critical of the politicians as a group and appeared to be genuinely interested in furthering education and communications opportunities for the young people of the island. The Prime Minister did not hide his light under a bushel. He was accustomed to lecture the populace on his superior qualifications. Looking back on it I think there must be an amusing story hidden here with such an interesting if not outrageous cast of players.

Bequia is the largest island of the Grenadines and lies just about 10km from St. Vincent. It’s unspoilt - at least it was and we as a team spent several working weekends here. In the far background is the small town of Port Elizabeth where I saw the giant ray descending as the ferry docked!

My two colleagues and I dutifully arranged meetings and covered our itineraries. The weeks went by and we began to draft our initial reports. When they were drafted I looked around to identify to whom we should present them. Neither of the two ladies displayed any interest. To receive them would mean they would have to comment and give feedback. This would commit them to one or other courses of action. As I said they wanted the money, but they were quite content to let education roll along as it had ever done. Change presented risks. Then there was the question as to where previous funding had gone? In the absence of any details I was forced to make some assumptions and to come up with budgetary outturn figures. I recall these budgetary figures indicated depressing pictures regarding absence of investment, poor quality and impact and the like.

This was seen to be upsetting to the two ladies, especially the Minister. I and my colleagues began to be accused of abusing their trust. We became somewhat desperate in having a response to our findings because without responses we knew we would
not be paid by Brussels, nor would we considered to have carried out our mandate by the Delegation in Barbados. The role of the latter was made a little complex by a clash, an unfortunate clash of personalities. After several years of complaint with no response the Prime Minister had written to Brussels demanding the resignation of the Head of Delegation in Barbados. This is the only time I've encountered such a situation and we marvelled that the recipient of quite a lot of European funding was calling for the head of the EC official who had provided that funding.

At one level, I feared that I and my colleagues were jeopardising the peace and tranquillity of this latter-day Eden. On another, I had the feeling there were more sinister things afoot.

In parallel with all this my colleagues and I had begun to adapt to local social opportunities. I was given to patronise the only pub worthy of its name, which was owned by the nephew of the Prime Minister. Occasionally, I was accompanied by my Dutch colleague, rarely by the architect. I developed a friendly bond with the publican, who was most interested in the work of the mission. But traumatically and unexpectedly as the three of us were sitting for our evening meal and wine my learned architect began to proposition the young lady behind the counter. We heard him offer money for sexual favours and frankly we were disgusted; both disgusted as well as alarmed. Given that the three of us were working closely together and had few secrets both my friend the Dutchman and I were appalled that he would do this and that he would do this in front of us. We also were very much aware that the three of us were the only white noses in the whole town of Kingston and were under constant scrutiny. All we needed was for our two ladies to be informed of the Italian's predilections. I suspected that were it to become public knowledge it would have been a great pretext for them have the three of us drummed out of the island.

This was the first time I had ever experienced this kind of shenanigans. I made a strong objection to the architect and warned that if anything were to arise from this procurement attempt or any other similar liaisons that I would make sure he was on the next flight to Europe. I was genuinely outraged. I remember e-mailing the office so as to prepare them and feeling the lash of their indignation in return. Still I see him shrugging his shoulders and looking at me as if I had come out of the trees and saying in his accented English “But I am a man. I must have woman.”

To return to the situation regarding presenting our reports I had an inspiration. Over dinner, I asked my friend the publican if he would be so kind as to deliver a copy of my report to his uncle the Prime Minister. He readily agreed. I reckoned it might upset my team colleagues so I kept my secret to myself.

The next morning, all the whistles and bells blew from the Minister and from the National Authorising Officer's offices. They demanded a meeting that afternoon. My colleagues were somewhat nonplussed as they had no idea what had transpired. As we entered into the office of the National Authorising Officer she stood up and waved the copy of my report in our faces. Turning to me she gave me a piercing look and demanded with some indignation as to whether I recognised the document? I replied, as graciously as I could that I had missed it but I thought I had lost it in a pub. I thanked her profusely for finding it for me. The poor lady was speechless. She knew full well that I had passed the document to the publican and its significance. She also
realised she now had to respond on its contents to her boss, the Prime Minister, with whom she was no longer on a good footing. She realised she needed our help for that.

St Lucia: Nelson’s Cove where he camouflaged his ships and hid successfully from the Spanish fleet.

I found it so difficult to keep a straight face when as we left both my colleagues expressed their amazement at the fact that I could lose a document in a public house and then to have it reappear in the office of the National Authorising Officer. I suppose things are not always as they seem. Somehow I think the ladies developed a certain respect for the way they had been outmanoeuvred. Over the next days and weeks, we did our best to conclude business as best we could.

I’m not sure I ever completely broke the ice with the two of them but there was some movement and I hope on the basis of our recommendations that funding was made available and that it was put to good use.

First explored by the Spaniards in the 16th century and then settled by the English in the mid-17th century, Suriname became a Dutch colony in 1667. With the abolition of
slavery in 1863, workers were brought in from India and Java. Independence from the Netherlands was granted in 1975. At just under 165,000 km² Suriname is the smallest sovereign state in South America. (French Guiana, while less extensive and populous, is an overseas department of France.) Suriname has a population of approximately 566,000, most of whom live on the country's north coast, where the capital Paramaribo is located. Suriname is unique is the only Dutch-speaking country in South America. They are very proud of this uniqueness. The Dutch language unites them. Otherwise at home families will us their own inherited language either Korean, Urdu or the like.

Currently the breakdown between the main religious groups is Hindu 27.4%, Protestant 25.2%, Roman Catholic 22.8%, Muslim 19.6%, and indigenous beliefs 5%. In my opinion the wealthiest and most progressive community was formed from the Muslim and Hindu descendants of farmers and labourers transported from the Indian subcontinent. It is very cosmopolitan. On a racial origin the breakdown is Hindustani - also known locally as "East Indians"- their ancestors emigrated from northern India in the latter part of the 19th century: 37%, Creole mixed white and black: 31%, Javanese: 15%, "Maroons" their African ancestors were brought to the country in the 17th and 18th centuries as slaves and escaped to the interior: 10%, Amerindian: 2%, Chinese: 2%, white: 1%, other: 2%. There are also communities of Koreans and Japanese. The economy is dominated by the mining industry with exports of alumina, gold, and oil.

On a more dubious assessment covering illicit drugs the country has been developing as a growing trans-shipment point for South American drugs destined for Europe via the Netherlands and Brazil and as a regional hub point for arms-for-drugs dealing. A feature of travel to Suriname is the heavy, very heavy searches for drugs applied on the European side for immigrants and returning holiday makers – and certainly to us on our return through Schipol.

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8 Wickipedia again.
Paramaribo is the capital of Suriname. It is the centre of a Dutch speaking culture on the South American mainland. All around Suriname there is either Spanish or French or English spoken.

There is certainly a charm about this small country. The biggest surprise to us was the fact that the original Dutch settler families who had created the colony have long departed. They had however bequeathed the Dutch language to the descendants of the indentured labourers they had transported to the country from their colonies across Southeast Asia - especially from Indonesia.

Simply put, Paramaribo has the widest range of cultures probably in the world for a small city of its size. As one local friend proudly confirmed to us “here we speak every language on the globe – but Russian! This multiracial society is quite happy to exist and to interact democratically. Most of the descendants of those transported from South Asia or Southeast Asia still retain their use of Korean or Japanese or Chinese as second or third languages.

More importantly, they still retain their traditional individual national cuisines. I had my first experience of Korean cooking in Paramaribo. Most curious of all me though was their determination to retain their Dutch as the official language of the country. They were certainly proud of their Dutch and for being different. They still receive funding support from the Netherlands, and from the European Union. But recent relationships with the Netherlands had gone through a period of strain perhaps due to a coup mounted by local military people in the 1950s and 1960s.

I suppose the photograph above of the swimming pool in the hotel at Paramaribo says the lot. This is not necessarily what the officials of the Inter-American Bank or even what spouses of individual consultants want to see. Instead, I suppose what they want to see is their loved ones struggling and taking the punishment as they develop
proposals and policies for the betterment of mankind. Actually, we didn't stay in this hotel, but in a simpler one, which was equally charming some 2 km outside the city centre.

A further feature of the city is a wide river frontage. The distance to the far side is more than a mile wide, and the panorama overall is certainly dignified and grand. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Germans decided to scuttle one of their warships just off the waterfront. The capsized hull projects above the water and dominates part of the river approach. It surprises me that there have not been demands made to the German Government to have this hazard to shipping removed. Another feature is the very high bridge, built on stilts, connecting the east and the west across the river. It dominates the river scene.

I was riveted as a birdwatcher to observe all the new species of birds - all different to what I have experienced either in Europe or South Asia. Robins appeared to have yellow breasts. Every morning, while we breakfasted they fought with a variety of birds with a beautiful blue and the radiant plumage. It was spectacular to see them.

The interior of the country is very sparsely populated and is recognised to be one of the more adventurous regions to visit. Suriname invests a larger share of national resources in education than many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean Region. Despite the amount of resources allocated to education, the sector is acknowledged to suffer serious problems in the low quality of the service provided and with institutional, organizational, operational and management problems. We were in Paramaribo in response to a request for services from the Inter-American Development Bank to put education reforms in Suriname back on the rails after a period of inactivity and deterioration. The goals of the reforms were to contribute to the development of human capital of the children of the poorest segments of the population.
The reform agenda acknowledged shortcomings in relation to the quality and internal efficiency of basic education. The project had been prepared in 2003. In March 2004, Suriname signed a loan agreement to finance it. Two years later in October/November 2006 a Mid-term evaluation was carried out of the project. The results established that apart from some school building nothing had happened.

The team worked together with the persons responsible for the original project to try to build up a consensus as to what needed to be done. We became very aware of the constraints on the small population to identify, select and build up people with the necessary overview, discipline and energy. We organised a number of workshops and presentations and working together with some long domiciled expatriates we thought we had come up with an answer, which could have some chance of success.

We had to take into consideration the need to bridge the divide between education services provided by the government and those provided by the separate religious groups including Christians of various callings, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and others. It was a steep learning curve and in the short time we had we attempted to respond to and placate the criticisms of the representatives of the various groups.

At the final workshop I presented on a direct personal instruction from the Minister of Education that the reforms were to be on the basis of a trickle-down: concentrating initially in a limited number of schools and areas of the country. There was intense discussion and people spoke both for and against. The arguments were logical and eventually most parties settled for a consensus where the number of schools would be increased but would be still far short of national coverage. So, we rolled out a report on that basis and submitted it to be Bank and the Government and took our leave.

The Dutch Zeelandia Fort on the river bank, Paramaribo, Suriname.
A few weeks later, we found that the President had unilaterally gone against his Prime Minister and made a decision to reverse this consensus. The path forward was to be total national coverage and with the required capacity building development of materials to be accelerated to meet a completely revised project deadline. This was unrealistic; it far exceeded the capacities of the officials available. We learned that our local counterparts - not to speak of the Bank which was funding the reform - were less than enthusiastic at this change of direction.

We also were informed that elements of the reform policy which had been prepared for the government by a senior planner from the Netherlands had not been paid for. The reason given was that the Government regulation that fees paid to international consultants should not exceed the fees payable to the local experts employed by the ministries. This international expert claimed his fees which were substantially higher and with payment delayed placed an embargo on implementation of a range of strategies until they were paid.

A feature of working in poorer countries is the contrast between the rightful needs of girls and boys to an education and the resistances encountered; whether due to political bias, lack of prioritisation or just downright ignorance and which prevents these basic rights being extended. On occasions such as this it is highly frustrating for me personally and my colleagues to have to accept that an outside consultant ultimately has little influence on such political processes. It is equally frustrating to realise that in such circumstances progress in so far as there will be progress will be determined by expatriate investment in partnership with local elite groups. The results often fail to match the aspirations of the neediest elements of the society.

A personal assessment

My perception of the Caribbean has been almost totally limited by exposure to the English islands. I did have some reservations in relation to the abuse of the English language and local usage which is short and brutal. But it doesn't take much to associate this absence of gentility or refinement of the language to the brutality experienced by these populations during the couple of hundred years of the slave trade. On one occasion I was checking into a hotel and after a sort of uncouth conversation I exploded and asked ‘doesn’t anyone here say please or thank you’ and left. Over time it became something of an obsession with me. I suppose I could have been a little more understanding.

Which of the islands did I find to be the most attractive? That's a very difficult question to answer. I'll reflect just a small while. As I sit here with my voice recognition equipment – I will let my imagination float to one or two places. The first is the island of St Lucia. It's a haven for yachtsman with the twin peaks and attractive coastline. It is very unusual indeed unique. Then there are several very pleasant towns and villages to visit with well provided watering holes.

The first time I visited the island. I was very impressed by a deep harbour; I think it was called Nelson’s Harbour. It was said to be the place where Nelson sheltered his ships and camouflaged the mast-tops with pine trees so as to escape from the superior French or Spanish fleet, which was searching for them. There is everything on the
island: scenery, history, beautiful restaurants, and overall a very pleasant environment. From there it's only a short hop for the French experience of Martinique. I suppose the point is if I were to go back on holiday I would base myself in St Lucia.

From there too it is just another short hop by plane or by boat down along the west coast of St Vincent, with its active volcano. Kingston with its 10,000 people is a staging point for the Grenadines. It has a well-appointed marina, about two miles east on the southern coast. The marine environment there is beautiful, laid-back and altogether a most enjoyable place to spend a few days.

Sailing south, whether by ferry or yacht brings you to the northernmost of the Grenadines, Bequia, at a distance of about 8 miles. Here on this nearest island to Kingston I and my colleagues spent two most enjoyable weekends finalising our reports. It is simple. It is spectacular. On our arrival by small local ferry from Kingston and in its going-about to moor in the small harbour we caused an amount of disturbance amongst which I saw a huge ray rising from the depths. I wasn't in any rush to go swimming!

That would be my itinerary. But in going there, you would avoid Barbados, Jamaica and St. Maarten - all of which have a lot to offer. One place, I never visited and which I have always wished to see was Cuba.