

Ideal and Reality of "Project for the Minority People by the Minority People"

Multi-ethnic nation

Tomo is a 36-year-old Japanese woman. After working for a private company in Japan for less than 2 years, she went to the US to study international educational development in a graduate school. It was extremely difficult to find a job after finishing her Master's Degree, but she was finally recruited by a UN Agency specialized in education and culture as an Assistant Programme Specialist. She spent one year in the Headquarters before requesting a transfer to a developing country in Asia.

Tomo had spent 6 months in this country prior to joining the UN Agency as a researcher and was extremely happy to move back there as a UN Agency staff. She was convinced that she would be able to contribute to education there. After 5 years in the Capital, Tomo learned the language, made many local friends, and developed good relationships with her counterparts. She thought her career was on the right track.

"I can't believe that this is the same country!" Tomo muttered when she got off the plane at a local airport in Lang Tang Province near the southern border of the country in March, 2008. After spending 5 years in the Capital as an education specialist with extensive travelling in the country, Tomo thought she had a good understanding of the country. But this place was very different from the North-Western part of the country Tomo was used to, where most of her education projects were located. Hot and damp air reminded her more of South-East Asia rather than the country she was familiar with.

In addition to the majority, it is said that 100 million people from ethnic minority groups live in the country. In addition to the majority population, the Government recognizes 55 "official" ethnic minorities. Twenty six of these 55 minorities live in Lang Tang, which borders with Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Lang Tang's ethnic minority population is about 30% of the province's total population, which, anthropologically, makes Lang Tang a very special place in the country. Minority peoples' unique manners, culture, and folk-art are loved widely the tourists. The

provincial Capital, Hailing, is cool in the summer and warm in winter and so is called "the City of Everlasting Spring." Tomo met many people who want to live in Kunming after retirement. Tomo thought that it would be nice while walking in the town in Hailing.

HIV/AIDS situation in the Country

The number of HIV-positive people in the country has been increasing steadily. Currently, it is said that 700,000 people are living with HIV. Among them, 1/3 belongs to ethnic minorities. Considering that ethnic minorities are only 8% of the total population, we can say that the infection rate among minorities is considerably higher than that of the majority.

There are several reasons behind the high vulnerability of minorities. It is widely understood that the minority population have limited access to HIV and AIDS prevention programmes due to poverty, unique traditions and cultures, different languages and geographic isolation. It can also be said that the Government's prevention programmes for minorities have been largely insufficient. The Government has some interventions, such as the distribution of disposable needles, the promotion of condom use, and the provision of methadone replacement, but they are still at the pilot stage and cover only 10% of the needy population. HIV and AIDS in the country are now spreading to the general population through heterosexual intercourse, rather than through unclean needles as among injecting drug users.

The UN Agency feels that the lack of the understanding of HIV and AIDS by the minority populations is the key problem and has been implementing a project supporting the minority communities in Southeast Asia since 2001. The project supports the community members to produce and broadcast radio dramas in their own language, instead of using the materials developed in the standard national language that is often the case in the Government's prevention education campaigns. The project has been extremely successful and appreciated very much by the Government and the community people. Tomo and her colleagues arrived to Hailing to start up a similar project in a new village in Lang Tang Province.

The Ka People

Tomo and colleagues took a domestic flight from Hailing to Songshan City for 40 minutes. The target village was several hours' drive away from Songshan City.

The Ka minority people live in 3 different countries in the regions. Their life was based on hunting and gathering, but now their major industry is agriculture. The area is in the "Golden Triangle," one of the major production sites of the opium poppy and some people are said to make living by poppy farming. Drugs are one of the major problems of the area and HIV infection through needles is the major cause of the epidemic. Their culture and language are very different from Tomo was used to in the Capital and it seemed like another world to her, even though they are still in the same country. It is said that there are 350,000 Ka people living in the country - 40% of them live in Songshan Autonomous Prefecture. The Ka people have distinct South-East Asian features and their language is Khymer in origin. There are very limited number of people who understand the national standard language.

The village had electricity, but only 10% of the villagers had telephone lines and it felt very much isolated from the rest of the world. Tomo saw some advertisements for mobile phone companies, but she never saw a single villager with a mobile phone.

When Tomo was told that UNAIDS approved the provision of funds to a project to support a HIV radio drama project in Lang Tang, she was convinced that the project would be a success without any trouble. The project was already implemented in another village with similar cultural backgrounds and effectiveness of the project was already proven. Tomo herself believed that the project was very innovative - other "awareness raising" campaigns in the past have been not much more than mere translation of the materials developed by the Government, with insufficient consideration given to the unique culture of the minority populations. On the other hand, the UN Agency project, started in 2001 to support minorities in the Greater Mekong River area, aims at developing capacity of the local communities to identify the risks and needs, develop radio dramas, and broadcast them. Tomo thought that this is the most appropriate approach from bottom-up and sustainability perspectives. People in the community seemed to understand the UN Agency's ideas and were very excited that the UN Agency was respecting and supporting

their language and culture.

The content of the project was already there and Tomo and her colleagues invited Laura from the Regional Office. She was the initiator of this project. She studied in Hailing in the 80s and speaks several languages fluently, including the standard national language of the country. She is also an anthropologist by training and her knowledge on minority populations in Greater Mekong Area is very much respected. In the Capital, Tomo had a veteran national project officer, Mr Song, for the day-to-day management of the project. With more than 20 years of experience in this field, he had developed a vast network of academics and officials in the country. Tomo's task as Mr Song's supervisor was only to check the progress of the project and disburse the funds on time. "This is easy" – Tomo smiled. The project in Lang Tang started in March and was scheduled to finish in December the same year, but no one was concerned with the tight schedule.

Reality in the UN, Reality in the Community

When Tomo proposed to implement this project in the country, she had another intention.

In the recent past, the UN agencies had worked independently from each other, bound by their mandates and capacities. However, this tendency had resulted in duplication and inefficiency and had come under severe criticism. In response, the UN agencies were making the effort to work as "One UN" at the country level, which included joint planning and evaluation, and to some extent, joint fund-raising. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) was founded in 1996 by 10 co-sponsor Agencies (UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR, WFP, ILO, UNODC, World Bank, UNFPA, and UNESCO) in order to coordinate efforts made by different agencies.

In this country, UNAIDS is taking the active role in sharing information amongst agencies and negotiating with the Government and the donors to raise funds for joint programmes. In this context, it is becoming more important for each UN Agency to present its comparative advantage. The UN Agency Tomo belongs to is not an exception. UNICEF has bigger funds and WHO has medical and public health expertise. Tomo thought "culture" was an important entry point for her Agency to tackle the issue of HIV and AIDS, and could be used to increase her UN Agency's

visibility. She was convinced that this project, aiming at HIV and AIDS risk reduction by empowering the minority population, would be acknowledged as her Agency's unique contribution.

Tomo and her colleagues visited Yunnan Province for a needs assessment. They were greeted by Mr Guo, the provincial project team leader and his team. Mr Guo is a Lang Tang native from the majority group and in his 50s. He looked very welcoming and supportive and Tomo immediately felt comfortable.

However, she faced the first barrier here. During the first meeting, he questioned the very concept of the project: "You know, the minority people are very poor. We say that we should not give fish to the people, but teach them how to fish. But, what if they don't even have fish for today? Capacity building and empowerment – they sound good, but they don't mean anything to the poor people. They are too poor to worry about HIV and AIDS. If we provide free screening and treatment, they will participate, but they don't understand the importance of knowing about HIV and AIDS and they are not interested." Tomo was puzzled. He had a strong accent and she could not fully understand him, but she could see that something was wrong from Mr Song's face.

"Why don't we just distribute money to the villagers? They will certainly appreciate it more than radio dramas." Tomo was still in shock. Mr Guo had been briefed on the project and had already accepted the project. Why was he saying this at this stage? Tomo tried to stay calm and explained how the project is aiming at creating a model of building capacity of disseminating HIV-related information to the minority populations by the minority populations. She also said that anyone can be infected by HIV, regardless of their economic status. Just because they are "too poor," it does not mean that they do not have to learn how to protect themselves.

"Well, I was just joking. But I just wanted you to know that the area we are going to target is extremely poor and there are other urgent needs. Having said that, I do agree that this is an innovative approach and it will be a good model once the project is implemented." Mr Guo smiled – from there the meeting went well and Tomo was relieved.

But Mr Guo had a very valid point. It is true that the scale and speed of the

country's economic development are unprecedented in the history and millions of people have been lifted from poverty in a very short time. However, rural poverty still persists. The number of "wealthy people" in the country is almost as big as Japan's entire population and this is why many countries regard this country as the frontier market. However, almost the same number of people are still living under 1 US Dollar a day. It is perfectly understandable if her project, which does not build a hospital or provide medicines, is unattractive for these people. Tomo murmured to herself - "it is sad that my organization's mandate and ideas cannot directly deal with their very real needs."

The situation seemed to have turned better when Tomo arrived in the project village. The Vice-Governor of the Autonomous Prefecture, Mr Li, was the county project leader himself and facilitated coordination between the local Center for Disease Control and the Cultural Department and they had been discussing the importance of culture in order to reach ethnic minorities to effectively prevent HIV and AIDS. It is very rare to have such collaboration. Hailing City Radio Station quickly set up a production team consisting of a local play writer and musicians. The expert from the Regional Office, Laura, was also impressed with their commitment. Everything went well and Tomo was convinced of the success of the project when she left for Beijing.

However, as the time went by, Tomo saw Mr Song was getting worried. When she asked, Mr Song said that he was not sure if the project could be completed within the year. Why? The project was an easy one. We only needed to copy what we did in other places, Tomo thought. Mr Song explained that the local team did not have capacity to research and identify the needs for the radio dramas, which will then be the base of the stories. Mr Song had provided a short training to them on research design, information collection and analysis, but it was not enough for people who had no experience in conducting such research. The language barrier was also more serious than expected. Previously, Tomo and the team were told that people in the village understand written standard national language and the literacy rate is 80%. In reality, most of the people interviewed could only write their names.

Moreover, the Ka language also has dialects and sometimes they cannot communicate among themselves when speaking different dialects. It was finally decided to use the "standard" Ka language spoken in the Amu mountains, but it

was eye-opening to Tomo that even small minority populations can have such diverse cultures within.

In addition, since the Ka language does not have its own characters, the only people who can read and write the Ka language had been raised and educated in majority areas. They were the core members of the radio drama production, but how could we ensure that these people know the reality of the minority villages? Her organization's interventions were also difficult – the check of the script involved transitions from Ka language to standard national language, then to English. This was extremely time-consuming and the project was delayed substantially.

It is a huge country – this area is geographically and culturally closer to Vietnam or Laos. Sending experts from the Capital and/or the Regional Office for regular follow-up was too expensive. Now Tomo became skeptical about implementing this project from the Capital.

After seemingly endless trouble, Tomo was extremely happy to receive two scripts in December. “They are good – they talk about their life depending on migrations in search of jobs. They also deal with the issue related to drug abuse very candidly” – Tomo and Mr Song smiled at each other. Although it took much longer than expected, we finally had good scripts. This must have been the most difficult part of the project. Tomo was relieved.

More Problems

The relief did not last long. Soon, Tomo received a request from the local project team. “Radio is out-of-date now and people will not listen. Why can't we produce a TV drama?” Tomo could not believe what she heard. Why are they saying this now? The project must be finished this year and there is no budget! But the project team members insisted that the production can be inexpensive if we could work with the local community people as actors. When Tomo consulted the Regional Office, the answer was not positive. Laura was not convinced with the quality of such TV dramas – the radio dramas had been successful and there was no reason to change the project framework especially at this late stage. Tomo fully understood, but could not help thinking “what would be the use of radio dramas if no one listens to it? Wouldn't people watch the TV drama if their people are involved as actors?”

However, changing the project activity would have required complicated administrative procedures. The project did not have the time or the budget. Tomo sighed hopelessly.

Unexpected “Ambush”

It was not possible to complete the project by December. Tomo negotiated with UNAIDS and obtained a two month extension. However, since the country celebrates Spring Festival in January/February, the actual working time was extremely limited. In order to wrap everything up, Mr Song and Laura went to the project site for one last time.

At the same time, Tomo’s office in the Capital received two external auditors. It was part of the evaluation of the organization’s management, directed by the General Conference. The auditors stayed for two weeks and reviewed several projects, including this one. The first week was very quiet, but Tomo was called in at the beginning of the second week. After brief introduction and greetings, the auditors started the interview with a key question: “In this project, quite a big portion of the fund has been used to staff salary and travel. Can you please explain?”

“For an organization with small funds,” Tomo replied, “the quality of the project depends on quality of staff and the innovative ideas behind the project. If we do not use the funds for people, how can we ensure the quality of the project?” She felt almost angry when the auditors replied “It seems not much money actually arrived in the project sites.” Calm down, calm down, Tomo told to herself.

“The main purpose of this project,” she explained, “is to build capacity of the local community and develop a model of disseminating the information to the minority people. We needed to deploy high-level experts in order to ensure that this very innovative model is well understood by the local people. The total budget is very small and we do not have any procurement component, which is very common for large projects implemented by other organizations. But we did not have any unnecessary travel and the fees paid to the experts are even lower than the market price.”

The auditors were listening quietly, nodding from time to time. Tomo thought that

her points were understood and rushed back to work.

However, when she read the draft report prepared by the auditors, she could not believe her eyes. Not only her explanation was not reflected in the report, but also the report implied that the project itself was designed to hire or maintain existing staff. The report will be discussed in the headquarters with member states. Tomo suddenly felt fatigued.

(Case end)