SUCCESS WITHOUT RELEVANCE

Posted on August 19, 2020 by Eddie

The fact that an agency is able to tell a number of success stories and can raise support from the church in the UK does not necessarily mean that what it is doing on the field is relevant or appropriate.
Category: Observations

It is perfectly possible for a mission agency to be well resourced from the UK, to have a very active program overseas and an enthusiastic supporter base in the UK, all without being relevant to the communities they purport to be serving. One obvious example could be agencies which are involved in planting their own churches as rivals to an already established denomination. Another example would be an agency which trains local church leaders, but which takes no account of indigenous rhetorical styles and which is based on a western theological tradition without any awareness of local theology or concerns. My own agency, Wycliffe, could be producing excellent translations, recruiting lots of missionaries and apparently being very successful. However, if those translations were all being done by expatriates with no input or consultation from local Christians, the work would not be relevant to the church around the world today.

There are a number of related reasons why agencies can fall into the trap of not being relevant to the local population. These tend not to occur in isolation but one a number of these will build up over time reinforcing each other.

- **Lack of awareness**. If mission work is to be relevant it must be rooted in the local context. All missionaries and mission agencies would agree to this concept, however not everyone achieves this in practice. Problems can occur when agencies generalise from the UK context to the rest of the world. It is easy to assume that a teaching program or an approach which works well in the UK will have universal relevance but this is rarely the case. We need to remember that resources that are developed in the west emerge out of a specific local context and cannot simply be applied elsewhere. For example, the collective nature of East African society and the concept of *ubuntu* mean that discipleship and training materials developed in the very individualistic west cannot be fruitfully used without adaption. Another way in which agencies can be unaware of the local situation is if they work with a generalisation which doesnâ€™t apply in a specific context. For example, it is easy to assume that there is a fundamental unity across all Muslim contexts and to ignore the specific factors which come to play in each place. These sorts of factors are particularly acute for agencies which place teams or trainers in a location for a few weeks at a time and who are unable to build up a deep corporate knowledge of the context.
- **Working to a UK Agenda**. Another possible source of irrelevance is when the agency works to an agenda decided in the UK. This can be particularly the case when an activity is maintained on the field because it can easily be funded from the UK. That which is attractive to British doners and supporters is not always the most appropriate thing to do on the field. Orphanages and child sponsorship are two types of programs which receive wide support in the UK, but which are often controversial in a field setting. When agencies are struggling financially, it is tempting to shape field programmes in a way that will attract donors or recruits, rather than in a

way which is more relevant to the situation.

- **Removing Agency**. There is a large and growing literature on the subject of expat missionaries and aid workers robbing local people of agency for their lives Missionaries who make decisions affecting local people without real consultation may believe that they are acting in their best interests, but ultimately, they are more likely to be harming them. Likewise, financial support that creates dependency but which does not provide people with the opportunity to grow and to become self-sufficient is ultimately not helpful.
- **Doing what weâ€™ve always done**. The ultimate aim of an agency; planting churches, feeding the poor or whatever may not change very much (though it may need tweaking from time to time). However, the way in which the agency goes about that goal should change as the situation changes. If there is no significant difference between what an agency is doing today and what it was doing thirty years ago, then it is almost certain that it is not being as relevant as it could be. Mission agencies can build up a massive amount of inertia; tradition and the emotional commitment of their staff means that they can easily become wedded to their methodologies and may not change when they should. Agency boards need to face this problem.
- **Doing someone elseâ€™ job**. It is easy to assume because there is an apparent need for something to be done, that the agency should be involved in doing it. However, there are many roles that should be accomplished by churches and other local organisations rather than mission agencies. Just because there is an apparent hole, it does not mean that agencies are required to fill it.
- **Believing our own publicity**. Mission agencies need to produce various types of publicity in order to inform supporters of their work and to, hopefully, attract new supporters. It is natural in these sorts of publications to emphasise the successes of the agencyâ€™s work and to minimise the problems. Problems can occur if the board, or the leadership team, accept the account of the agencyâ€™s work given in the publicity uncritically. While agency publicity tends to be accurate, it only ever gives a partial account and this can, unfortunately, distort the picture of the agencyâ€™s impact. It is very unlikely that the agencyâ€™s overall work is as effective or relevant as the impression given by their publicity. For this reason, boards must be careful not to rely on the agencyâ€™s own reports as a source of information.

The fact that an agency is able to tell a number of success stories and can raise support from the church in the UK does not necessarily mean that what it is doing on the field is relevant or appropriate.Â Boards have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that the agencies they govern are relevant to their context. This means that they need to be missiologically aware and that they should have processes in place to regularly review what it is the agency is doing and the context in which they are doing it.

This is another section from the booklet that I am writing for mission agency boards. I hope that it will be available for download and on the Kindle Store by the end of next month.