KEEP UP!

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Can the old wineskin of the Western mission agencies serve the new wine of the rising world mission movement? This is a massive challenge and one which technology alone will not solve.
Category: Church: World

Twenty years ago we were living in a village in Ivory Coast were we worked as part of the team helping to translate the New Testament into the Kouya language. Our office was a mud building with a thatched roof with solar panels to provide enough electricity to keep the laptop running. When we needed to print out lots of documents, say a test run of a Gospel, we had to drive the car right up to the office, keep the engine running (not ideal in the tropics) and connect the car-battery to the solar panel system with jump leads.

If we needed to be in contact with our office in Abidjan or our families at home, we had two options. We could visit the post-office in the local town from where we could sometimes place a long distance phone call, or we could drive six hours to Abidjan. More often than not, we chose the latter option - it was generally easier.

From time to time, we would need to have our translation work checked by a consultant which meant that the consultant had to come to stay with us in the village, or we could take the whole team to meet with the consultant in a convenient location. Either way, it was a hassle.

Twenty years on, and Sue is a translation consultant working with translation teams. This week she is checking the book of Colossians in the GuÃ©rÃ© language of Ivory Coast (it's related to Kouya). However, she hasn't had to fly out to Abidjan and the GuÃ©rÃ© team have not moved into our house in High Wycombe. It is all happening over the internet. Sue spends long hours talking to the team, working through the translation verse by verse over Skype. When the team makes changes to their draft translation, these show up on Sue's computer screen here in the UK, so that she can keep track of what is happening. It's a remarkable process and a long way removed from those hot, sticky days working in a mud hut.

Technology has made some profound changes; the village where we lived now has mains electricity and a 3G phone signal. It is hard to imagine how cut off we were a mere 20 years ago. In turn these changes in technology have made it possible for translators to work in very different ways.

However, when we focus on technology, we can lose sight of the more profound changes that are taking place in front of us. The biggest difference over those twenty years is not the advent of the internet and faster computers, it is the change in the nature of translation teams. Twenty years ago, we were a key part of the Kouya translation team - even though we are clearly not Kouya. Today, the GuÃ©rÃ© team is entirely made of up GuÃ©rÃ© speakers, who are perfectly able to do translation without the help of an expat team on the ground.

We like technology and we get excited by it, but the biggest changes in world mission are not driven by computers and the internet, but by the changing face of the world church. The challenge for Western based agencies is to find ways to adapt to these changes; our organisation and funding systems are designed to meet a situation which no longer exists.

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You can read more about what Sue actually does when she is consulting here.Â