DIGGING HOLES
Practicing Mission and Development in a Multi-lingual African Context of Jostling for Money and Power
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Jim has lived in the same Luo village in Kenya since 1993, communicating almost entirely using African languages. During this time, based on participant observation methodology, he has completed a PhD and had eight books and numerous articles published.

He hopes to “translate” some thoughts into language westerners can understand.

“As a Westerner who has learned something of ‘native ways,’ I have the advantage that I am largely familiar with the contexts into which I am translating or explaining content that is ‘not known.’”

“When a billion people in the world live in chronic hunger, and water resources are under pressure, we cannot pretend the problem is ‘elsewhere’” (UNESCO, “World Water Day 2012 Commemoration”).
• Awareness of the poverty and suffering in Africa had led kind-hearted Westerners to want to do something to alleviate this suffering. Missionaries want to follow Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25.

• The mission world has built hundreds of hospitals, schools, and wells throughout Africa, and yet the crises of poverty and disease continue.

• At times, Western-funded institutions (hospitals, schools, wells, etc.) are simply abandoned once the missionary turns them over to locals.

This paper questions whether missionaries and development workers can effectively engage with Africa's problems using non-indigenous languages.

Failure to use local languages and resources when engaging in mission and development results in long-term foreign workers digging holes into which they subsequently fall.

Failure to use local languages can lead to loss of contextually-attuned insights, that might have led to human flourishing and more effective ways to address global crises.

DIGGING HOLES: OVERVIEW

• This article observes that in multi-lingual Africa there is intense rivalry for the money, prestige, and power that comes through relationships with the West.

• It reveals the key importance of careful consideration of language of use. If some outsiders do not sidestep the stereotype of being sources of wealth, mission and development initiatives can be subsumed in a destructive morass of intense jockeying for position by locals.

Western aid to Africa creates problems.

Widespread use of English contributes to misguided assumptions about a shared cultural context.

Westerners provide resources in an attempt to solve problems.

Missionaries who promote God’s Word tend to threaten long-held traditions.

Vulnerable mission: a path to success.

DIGGING HOLES: OVERVIEW

Western aid creates dilemmas and dependencies

Because donors do not usually understand the local context (especially culture and language), resources such as hospitals and schools built with donor funds end up not being used in culturally effective ways, or sometimes not being used at all.

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WESTERN AID CREATES DILEMMAS AND DEPENDENCIES

“Numerous examples exist of hospitals, schools, and other facilities that were built with donor funds and left to rot, unused, in developing countries that did not have the resources or will to maintain them” — M. Lawson, Congressional Analyst in Foreign Assistance.

THE “PINCER EFFECT”

Familiarity with local ways of doing life can enable missionary or development workers to be in a helpful position when it comes to planning and implementation of development projects. Unfortunately, such people can end up caught in a “pincer” between local leaders and donors.

WESTERN AID CREATES DILEMMAS AND DEPENDENCIES

THE “PINCER EFFECT”

• The local person is trying to maximize income by saying what the donor wants to hear. They won’t like the experienced worker if they are threatening their income.
• Donors often want to acquire understanding directly from local people. They won’t like the experienced worker if they interfere with their donations.

WESTERN AID CREATES DILEMMAS AND DEPENDENCIES

THE “PINCER EFFECT”

• Result: The experienced worker can be left out of conversations or become the enemy of both! Long-term workers end up digging a hole for themselves whenever they open their mouths.
• Result: A missed opportunity for contextualization insights which could bolster the success of a project.

WIDE-SPREAD USE OF ENGLISH

• The wide-spread use of English contributes to misguided assumptions about a shared cultural context between donor and recipient.
• English seems to be a “universal” language, but Western English is built on a shared history and culture that is vastly unfamiliar to African villagers.
• The opposite is also true: local culture and locals’ use of the English language are vastly unfamiliar to the Westerner.
• The resulting miscommunication limits development and Gospel advocacy.

WIDE-SPREAD USE OF ENGLISH

• A native-speaker of English from the West uses English in ways that are consistent with her own cultural background.
• An African who learned English as a second language may in his mind be speaking his heart language, just trying to express it using sounds associated with English.
• Result: Both are speaking in English, but they may mean very different things, even when using the same words.
• Result: Deep confusion and disagreement about what the other person really meant to say.
WIDE-SPREAD USE OF ENGLISH

EXAMPLE OF THE DIFFICULTY IN USING ENGLISH TO COMMUNICATE IN AFRICA: A researcher may want to discover whether African men "love" their wives.

• Which African term will be translated into "love" in English?
• What does "love" look like when considered from within a framework of a Western "taboo" such as polygyny? The cultural leap required is vast.

WIDE-SPREAD USE OF ENGLISH

"The fact that there is never a complete overlap in meaning between a word in the source language and receptor language means that translation will always have a distorting impact. The more the cultural contexts of the two languages differ, the greater the likelihood of lack of overlap" (Youssef Dembele).

An outsider engaging African people using English will be engaging in only a part of their life.

WIDE-SPREAD USE OF ENGLISH

A vulnerable mission approach emphasizes using indigenous languages to communicate. This can reveal otherwise hidden aspects of the people’s ways-of-being, some of which will drive the success or failure of outside initiatives.

WESTERNERS WANT TO SOLVE PROBLEMS WITH RESOURCES

• Warm-hearted Westerners typically set up a system they expect will continue to be managed in the way that they advocate.
• Donors and short-term personnel who implement projects are focused on efficient use of time and resources. In many kinship-based cultures, however, timelines for accomplishing tasks are less relevant.
• A long-term worker or missionary who understands this dynamic is often hard-pressed to gain a hearing from short-term project facilitators who must deliver the timely results expected by donors (the "pincer effect").

WESTERNERS WANT TO SOLVE PROBLEMS WITH RESOURCES

Foreigners having financial power while blind to local circumstances can result in a scenario akin to blindman’s buff. In this game, others laugh at the antics of the person who is blindfolded. In African contexts, outsiders encourage local people to clutch for their money, but do not have the understanding needed to realize that as a result of their lack of local knowledge, they are the blindfolded person in blindman’s buff.
Westerners want to solve problems with resources

Recipients of outside funds are frequently caught in another game—"tug of war."

• They want to help their community in the way the community itself understands what it needs.
• But they don’t want to offend donors in case they decide to stop funding projects that fall outside of their intended purpose. They also realize they might be accused of corruption for using the funds improperly.

The degree of contextualization of an inter-cultural mission or development intervention might be said to be limited to the degree that a recipient is allowed to refuse the will of a donor.

Vulnerable mission’s alternative:

An outsider’s material contributions to ministry should either be pegged (roughly) to those made by local people, or should be zero.

Advantages:

a. Local people can be honest with them as they are not trying to impress the outsider to enable a flow of funds in their direction.

b. By not controlling purse-strings, the outsider avoids taking charge of contexts that they do not understand.

c. Not being involved in a “dance of generosity” enables an outsider to spend time on sustainable mission or development, including innovations in what could in the West be considered the “spiritual sphere.”

Missionaries may encourage someone to ignore taboos, either because the prohibition seems to be rooted in belief in ancestors (rather than faith in the true God), or because scientific research shows a traditional practice is detrimental.

If local people believe a taboo needs to be upheld to avoid misfortune, yet missionaries are proposing that it needs to be removed, then to local people what the missionary is promoting is dangerous and risks bringing misfortune.

Example: There is a kind of priority order amongst the Luo people for the planting of crops. Basically, older people must plant before younger people.
A Westerner is unlikely to be criticized for encouraging young people to plant before their elders, while they are channeling funds into a community. Such immunity to criticism can end if funds are no longer coming.

MISSIONARIES POSE THREATS TO LONG-HELD TRADITIONS

Whereas contemporary missionaries’ use of outside funds can guarantee an audience regardless of the relevance of their message, Jesus and Paul were immediately vulnerable to contextualizing forces. If not contextually pertinent, Jesus and Paul’s words would not attract an appreciative audience. When Jesus and Paul engaged in activities perceived by locals as destructive, such as Jesus’ habit of healing on the Sabbath, local opposition surfaced. This sifted out those ready to believe and those only interested in physical gain.

MISSIONARIES POSE THREATS TO LONG-HELD TRADITIONS

VULNERABLE MISSION: A PATH TO SUCCESS

CLOSING REMARKS:

Mismatch between peoples’ cultural backgrounds, misunderstandings from inadequate translation, and the “pincher effect” all contribute to failures in mission work and in development programs. As a result, the church’s mission efforts can appear like children’s play—blindman’s buff—where the missionary is the blind man, and efforts at promoting sustainable development can be reduced to a farce.

VULNERABLE MISSION: A PATH TO SUCCESS

CONCLUSION:

Vulnerable mission, whereby some Western missionaries confine their ministry involvement to local languages and resources, is here suggested as a necessary component of effective engagement (and to avoid digging holes) in seeking to meet “spiritual” and “physical” needs. The impact of the Gospel on a society will take time to bear fruit.