



Blinded by the Light: Maps, values and the importance of skillful navigation in International Peacebuilding

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I used to live and work in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. My day job was focussed on conflict and peace building. Road trips were a good time to reflect on the context; and how my work related to it.

The nature of a state...

Ethiopia is a strong state, reasonably sure of its identity and sovereignty. Even so, for an outsider it poses a number of challenges. Language, culture, physical geography, history, food, etc. But it has all the things that one might look for in a country – a flag; an anthem; history; an airport; roads; shops; government policies; hospitals; etc.

...and a non-state

On one occasion, I had to drive to Hargeisa – the capital city of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland. It too has all the things one might look for in a state; and it has its own – different – set of challenges for an outsider. But it doesn't have sovereignty in the same way that Ethiopia does. Perhaps as a reaction to the chaos of Somalia, Somaliland – a former British Protectorate – has charted its own course. It looks and smells like a state but is recognised as such by only a very few countries – despite the fact that it is arguably a more successful “state” than Somalia itself.

What maps tell us...

On the way to Hargeisa, we had a map to hand. The map showed us useful things like roads, rivers and physical features. Following the journey on the map passed the time, but also helped us to know that we were heading in the right direction and making reasonable progress towards our goal. We passed through Ethiopia's fertile but fragile highlands, the greens and blues of the countryside echoed the colours on the map. As we dropped down into lower altitudes, the colour of our surroundings – and those on the map – turned more orange and yellow. The confident red of the road on the map turned to a thinner, white line which seemed to match the deterioration of the tarmac beneath our tyres. A good, fast road turned to potholes; and eventually to a gravel track.

Visible to us across the map was our destination, Hargeisa. The cartographers promised us a city at the end of another red line indicating the main road between it and Djibouti. All we needed to do was to intersect that red line, turn right and head on into town.



...and what they don't

As we left the Ethiopian town of Jijiga, heading towards the border, the map stopped being so helpful. There was nothing reassuring about the empty space on the map, but through the windscreen we could see a number of tracks heading in roughly the right direction; and along which it was clear that vehicles passed regularly. Along the way – following these tracks surrounded by the amazing scenery of the Somali Steppe – we assumed that we would cross another confident line that we could see on the map – the border between Ethiopia and Somaliland. We imagined that the border crossing itself would be obvious. Probably some buildings; maybe a flag or two; perhaps some traders, police officers and the like. And we imagined that the road would take us there.

After a while – more time than felt right given the terrain and the speed we were going – we started to notice a build-up of settlements. Something felt wrong. Then in the distance we saw lorries tracking across the horizon. Finally, we arrived at the edge of a tarmac road.

We had completely missed the border crossing point; and, as a result, we had managed both to leave Ethiopia illegally and enter Somaliland illegally. (Relative concepts, by the way, given the free movement of goods and people between the two countries on an entirely informal and daily basis. Although the rules for local people seemed quite relaxed, we had a sensed that our diplomatic registration and foreign faces probably required a more concrete compliance with border formalities.) So, having taken some local advice, we turned around and headed back towards Jijiga but on a slightly different rough track. We found the border post, drove around it back into Ethiopia – informally again – and then set about re-crossing the border this time properly. Many people must have seen us coming (and indeed going, earlier) and no-one seemed to bat an eyelid at our return and subsequent departure – this time with properly stamped passports.

Accidental mission failure

The point here is that our norms – captured in a fairly formal sense on the map but informed also by our cultural expectations projected onto the landscape of the Horn of Africa – had led us to engage in a manner which did not reflect the reality on the ground before us; and in so doing we had risked both formal censure for breaking a set of rules, and the possible failure of our mission which was to get to Hargeisa in time for a meeting with representatives of the

administration there. These norms, of course, had included a sense that boundaries are always obvious and marked; and that we would know them when we saw them. (But we didn't.)

This, of course, is an example of accidental mission failure denoted in tangible and physical things – maps; borders (or not); border crossings (or not); and stamped passports. But mission failure can equally derive from a misreading of local cultural and political norms – mistaking “our” norms for values shared by all those who have an effect on the issue, environment or geography which we seek to change. With a sinking feeling, I reflected on the number of times I had projected my own ambitions for conflict management and peace building onto a set of actors who I had assumed shared my goals, but perhaps did not.

Fatal logic

This failure to recognise how things actually work on the ground can often be amplified by an assumption that what is going on is illogical – or, even worse, “bad”. And there is no doubt that bad things – very bad things – go on all the time. But they are rarely illogical. Why what happens often has an almost fatal logic to it. People who we often consider to be bad are actually responding to the incentives which surround them with icy, cold logic. The challenge then is to attempt to understand this logic and to work with it – “go with the grain” is the term often used – and to attempt to influence it to mutual advantage. (Because the bad guys are not going to change their behaviour if they don't see an advantage to themselves in doing so.)

Working with the people who are the problem

But this is hard. It often involves dealing with people whose values we do not share; and whose incentives are alien to us. In order to advance our own objectives in such a context, we have to work with the people who are the problem – and this means working to understand them and why they do what they do before seeking to influence their behaviour. We know that to deal with the problems of marginalised young people, we need to work with the people and systems that marginalise them. We know that to promote gender equity we need to work with both the people who are excluded and the people who are the gate keepers. Similarly, to achieve our objectives against a backdrop of conflict and insecurity, we need to work with people who we may regard as being invested in the problem and who do not – apparently in any way – share our world view. This requires us – the users of maps and promoters of values – to learn the art of skilful navigation.



Skilful navigation

The art (it is an art, not a science) of skilful navigation is all about people. Learning to read them; learning to understand them and the incentives that play on them; learning how to talk to them and engage them. It involves being able to set aside our own norms and to consider those of others rationally and coolly. It doesn't involve projecting our norms and values onto others. But it does involve being clear about our own norms and values. Just because we seek to understand others who are not like us doesn't mean that we need to be like them – just that we need to be able to read them and what makes them tick.

Skilful navigation also involves recognising that every attempt we make to engage offers us something to learn. Sometimes because it has gone well, but more often – and better from a learning perspective – because it has not. And skilful navigation involves learning how to listen to others. Often our local partners know more about how change happens in their context than we do. They live, eat and breathe the local environment. Their success –

sometimes their personal survival – depends on it. So if they are successful navigators of what we might consider to be an obscure or difficult to understand context, why would we not learn from them about how to influence the other actors in their landscape?

In summary, then...

Working within a complex conflict, insecurity or political context is not about making judgements about good or bad. It is about accepting that what is happening (or, indeed, what is not happening) is a function of logic. Therefore, seeking to understand that logic – which is most likely to be found in the incentives surrounding an issue – is the obvious way to go. This involves recognising that sometimes our own presence – and values – can skew the context unhelpfully, so we need to learn how to work through and with others; and how to influence their behaviour. The goal is not a victory – good over bad – but a better accommodation of all the variables for a mutually beneficial future. And that must be the essential purpose of peacebuilding.



Oxford HR were delighted to be invited to sponsor the 2019 Partos Innovation Festival, which was all about inclusion. Our day started with a question: how often do you feel excluded? Most of our team members responded with 'rarely' and got a yellow bracelet. Seeing red, blue and yellow bracelets throughout the day was a simple and powerful reminder that everyone around us experiences the world differently.

Bart Romijn (Director of Partos) kicked off the event with a call for compassion in everything we do, calling it 'the magnetic field under our moral compass'. This is something that speaks to us as a company that strives to put people at the forefront of everything we do, working for a purpose and not just for a profit.

One of the awards being celebrated at this year's event was the NOW-Us award (Nothing About Us, Without Us). We were lucky enough to hear from some amazing change makers working to create more inclusive local communities. Anita Sescon Tan advocates for the voice of the elderly in the Phillipines, and called on those present not to create policies without consulting those it will affect. Ivan Kasonko, who fights for LGBT rights in Uganda with Speak Up! said that making policy is like cooking for a big group, you have to feed

everyone and not just yourself. Mercy Kure Sale and Wuni Bitrus from Deaf Tech Kids Nigeria focused on the need for equal access.

From Yetnebersh Nigussie, a disability rights activist from the Ethiopia, we learned that 93 million children in the world were out of school because of a disability. For her, it's clear that people with disabilities are lifelong innovators and should be consulted at every step of projects designed with them in mind.

A final thought for the day was about listening. Nidhi Goyal, Sexuality and Disability Program Director at Point of View, said that listening is not just about hearing, it's about taking action. She reminded us that we all have a part to play in creating a more just and inclusive world, and we hope to take that sentiment and help it power our work for the years to come.

For more information on the event and the incredible speakers, check out the [Partos website](#).

For thoughts on the role of recruitment in creating inclusive workspaces, read [our blog](#) about own inclusion and diversity event back in March 2019.



Oxford HR is very proud to have been shortlisted for the 2019 IRP Awards for the category 'Best Company to Work For (up to 50 employees)'

Huge congratulations to the whole team and watch this space for news on the night.



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