

***How our sub-regional office in south-east Asia has adjusted to its team located in five different countries... and four different time zones!***

*Setting the trend for a hybrid workforce*



The OIE Sub-Regional Representation for South-East Asia (SRRSEA) has a team of ten dedicated people; six of us are located in Bangkok, but four of us are currently abroad. Bolortuya is based in Mandalay, Myanmar, from where she is managing the part of an FMD project funded by New Zealand. She is now facing the recent political instabilities in the country, which are directly impacting Internet connectivity and the implementation of the project. Ashish currently lives in Vientiane, Laos, and Karma in Thimphu, Bhutan. Their adventures in getting a visa and a flight ticket to relocate to the Bangkok office (that they officially joined in July and August of last year, respectively) are summarised below. Laure is now working remotely in Paris, while our six colleagues based in Bangkok are mainly working from home with some regular visits to the office.

### **How we have adapted to time differences**

In our team, the teleworking challenge is increased by time differences. While Ashish and our Bangkok colleagues are in the same time zone, Bolortuya is half an hour behind. Did you even know that there were countries that had half hour differences with others?!? Karma is one hour behind Bangkok time, while Laure is six hours behind. No matter what, we all speak in 'Bangkok time' and we are quite proud to say that we have mistaken the timing only once in 2020!

Working constantly in four time zones has required additional adjustments to a usual working from home schedule as meetings often overlap with breakfast or dinner time. For example, Laure moves regularly (and not always discretely) from the living room to the bedroom depending on moments when her kids are still asleep, having breakfast or leaving for school; while colleagues in Bangkok regularly spend their dinner/post-dinner time having a last meeting or discussion with colleagues located further to the west. Despite regular but necessary exceptions, efforts are made to stick as much as possible to normal working hours, and therefore SRR team meetings are concentrated between 2pm Bangkok/8am Paris and 6pm Bangkok/12pm Paris.

Over time, we have learned to make the best use of these time differences. For example, our internal validation process follows a natural flow, facilitated by our different time zones: documents finalised in the evening in Bangkok can be reviewed in France in the afternoon and validated in the Thai morning the following day.

### **How our concepts of vacation have changed**

As for many of us, working from home has glued us to our workstations as never before, and both international and domestic travel restrictions have confined us to our homes during the evenings, weekends and holidays. In south-east Asia, borders are still closed, and expatriate staff in Bangkok were not able to go home in 2020. This will perhaps remain the case for most of 2021, alas. So, does this mean that COVID-19 is also changing our concepts of holidaying? Well, the uncertainty has provided us with the opportunity to explore places which are not typically touristy. Places which take you closer to nature or things you enjoy doing, such as photography, painting, relaxing with a book or doing absolutely nothing but celebrating life, which certainly helps to rejuvenate mind and body, and allow you to come back to work fully recharged and motivated! 😊

### **Coping with travel and visa issues**

As Ashish's family was gearing up to relocate to Bangkok, COVID-19 hit harder, severely impacting international travel, obtaining visas and the completion of the 'entry-into-Thailand dossier'. After prohibiting the entry of any foreigners, Thailand's visa process and notification kept changing as the pandemic progressed, and acquiring a visa got harder and harder. But no matter how difficult it is to obtain this visa, you now also need a certificate of entry- a document that we had never heard of before and which follows an even longer approval process, as well as the now-famous health certificate; not to forget the compulsory 14-day quarantine in a government-accredited hotel and the required health insurance.

In Bhutan, Karma faced similar issues and at some point, he even tried to join the Bangkok office via some cargo flights. Getting a non-immigrant visa has been so difficult that he opted for a tourist visa. (Note: while we were drafting this article, Karma finally got his visa on 3 February and is now waiting for the Certificate of Entry). If everything goes as planned, he will be travelling to Bangkok on 16 February to join our team. Thai beers are already in the fridge!

### **In the meantime, we have digitised our work**

Although digital tools were available before the emergence of COVID-19, their use had not been optimised until the pandemic. This improved use was enabled thanks to the promptness of the OIE IT Department in responding to the emerging needs and arranging required tools to create and enable a working environment. We have been trained on the use of Zoom, SharePoint, MS Teams, OneDrive, Smartsheet and other programs in Office 365; as for most of the world, this was a challenge.

But let's imagine what this challenge looked like for new staff who had never been exposed to any of those tools in their earlier work environment and had to learn how to work and communicate with colleagues that they had never met in person nor physically worked with. Karma was in this situation and with the support of the rest of the team and his strong personal commitment, he has mastered most of these tools. We noted and appreciated his constant efforts when the team received three invitations via Skype, Zoom and Teams for the same meeting! Karma helped us to establish a new routine by adapting the concept of learning from peers to the sharing of handy IT tool tips during staff meetings, which complement quite well the extensive offer of trainings and tips from the Digital Transformation and Information Services Department.

## How have we toggled our relationships to the remote-working mode?

To manage and build the team as efficiently as possible, the SRRSEA has established several routine activities and tools, notably using Microsoft Teams and organising more regular staff meetings. No missions, no external meetings, no travel to prevent us from attending what has become a proper and regular weekly staff meeting (including a welcome coffee break where we can chit-chat for a few minutes). This meeting allows us to update, review and plan our activities and also to discuss other important issues.

***“We also rotate the chairperson of these regular staff meetings as a way to hone leadership skills and build team spirit.”***

Other appreciated initiatives have been the regular meetings between staff and supervisors to provide guidance on the implementation of activities (while also promoting harmonious relationships), and the in-house seminars on specific topics. Both initiatives should be further pursued and organised more frequently.

But these formal activities have not been enough to help the team cope with the isolation or stress linked to the crisis: WhatsApp group discussions and ‘after-work events’ have provided us with an opportunity to chat, to drink, to sing, to share and to dream together.–

## What’s up for us in 2021 and beyond?

Working from home and virtual meetings is the new normal. We don’t think we will go back to how we ran the SRR activities before the pandemic. While it was a big challenge at the beginning, after almost a year, we found that using digital technology to cope with the absence of face-to-face activities could also achieve most of our targets. Of course, it cannot totally replace the impact of physical interactions which provide a sense of intimacy, connection and empathy that is difficult to replicate via video or while working virtually. On the other hand, the virtual meetings are cost-effective, time-saving and more flexibility, leading to increased attendance as most people have these services at their fingertips.

With the prospect of COVID remaining an issue to be faced this year, and maybe even next year, our hybrid workforce will continue to operate in this virtual environment. And the different staff locations, in different time zones, will no longer be a significant impediment for our team to deliver its mandate effectively.

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