

Tales of Bridgebuilders

The dream continues in Southeast Asia





Footbridges in Asia connect local inhabitants with schools, markets and hospitals.

The Next Chapter

After working for many years in Latin America, Toni el Suizo decided to head to Asia. In his own words, Toni tells of a new beginning in his work as a bridge builder.

Going from Latin America to Asia was a big step for me – I traveled exactly 180 degrees to the other side of the world.

I went to Southeast Asia for three reasons: a story, a movie and a man. The story: my undertaking, that of building bridges with peasants in need. The movie: “The Killing Fields” by Roland Joffé, about the US Army and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The man: Gau Hong, a Cambodian refugee living in Switzerland.

As a young boy, I was deeply moved by the movie “The Killing Fields.” My initial interest in Southeast Asia began early and only recently have I had the opportunity to make an impact. Gau Hong put me in contact with an adviser of Hun Sen, the Cambodian Prime Minister, who did not take long to sanction the construction of bridges in his country.

During my 14 years of work in Latin America, I learned about technical and practical bridge building procedures but more importantly I gained knowledge of countless human and mental issues. Thanks to the experience and support I gained while working with my Latin American friends, it became possible to overcome the many obstacles of building in a country like Cambodia.



"I know how hard it is to live without a secure bridge. During the last storm I saw the new community bridge shaking a little.

A teacher was crossing on her bicycle. As she was blown by a strong wind, she grasped the handrail and saved her life. If it had been a bamboo 'monkey' bridge, she would have been thrown into the river and would have drowned."

Mrs. Le Thi Bong, Ben Tre resident



I arrived in Cambodia in mid-2001 and quickly found two loyal hardworking mechanics, Sopol and Sopoan; they reminded me of my Ecuadorian colleague Walter.

Unlike Ecuador, Cambodia has few natural resources and has been destroyed by war and genocide. The first setback to building here was that the country lacked an oil industry and our pipe and wire rope had to be recovered and brought from abroad, multiplying logistics problems.

The daily life of the peasants is marked by extreme poverty, harsh labor conditions in the rice paddies, distress about the harvest, floods, droughts, debt, infections and malaria. Moreover, landmines are still present in many parts of the country, causing three victims every day.

Suspension bridges were previously unknown in Cambodia, much less ones built by the peasants themselves. At present, villagers have already completed 54 of them, serving about 160,000 people. In order to build 20 more bridges in 2008, we are currently receiving 50 tons of steel tubes from Tenaris and the same amount of flat steel from Ternium. In addition, Switzerland is providing us with wire rope from mountain cable cars.

Now, we have moved beyond Cambodia to the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Vietnam. Steel products for 20 bridges will be shipped from Argentina and Switzerland to Laos, the landlocked country north of Cambodia. In Vietnam, Cambodia's southern neighbor, Tenaris has donated tubes for 30 bridges of 50 that have been built to benefit 230,000 peasants.

At the same time, Tenaris is shipping steel tubes for 100 bridges to Ecuador. This means that for the first time in 20 years, we will have material for 140 bridges to be built simultaneously in three countries.

Anyone who knows a little about the peasants' daily struggle with rivers can imagine what this means. I still remember the initial stages in Ecuador's Amazonia, so for me, this is truly a miracle in the making. A miracle made by humans. A dream that continues on its way.

Toni el Suizo Ruttimann



Toni and the local communities in Southeast Asia have built more than 120 bridges.





Working Alongside the Communities

In the province of Ben Tre, Toni el Suizo has made life easier for peasants who cross the Mekong River in order to go to school, to market or to seek medical care.

Across the border, south of Cambodia and not too far from Ho Chi Minh City are the Vietnamese coastal provinces of Ben Tre, Tra Vinh and Bac Lieu, where Toni el Suizo has so far built 58 bridges with the local communities. Like Cambodia, Vietnam is a country marked by wars. Ben Tre is one such province where heavy fighting took place.

The area is located at the end of the Mekong River, in a delta with an enormous network of interconnecting rivers and artificial channels for boats, barges and irrigation. Daily transportation to work, school, markets and hospitals is accomplished by bike, motorcycle or even walking. But where the thin roads end at the canals and rivers, villagers must descend muddy riverbanks to boats, wait for ferries, or else use slippery “monkey bridges”—infamously dangerous, narrow crossings made of bamboo.

It was in the province of Ben Tre where Toni met Mr. Mai Son, a 65-year-old war hero and ex-governor of the province, who since his retirement dedicates his life to humanitarian bridge and road building for remote communities in the Ben Tre province. The two understood each other immediately through their one and only shared language: the language of service to the poor. Within days an efficient team was assembled, made up of

Slippery, bamboo “monkey bridges” were replaced by sturdy metal structures in the Ben Tre province.



Villagers work together to construct their community bridge.

provincial authorities, welders, a barge crew, a young engineer and a translator. It had been this woman translator's inspiration, Tran Thi Minh Chau, who had initially brought the two bridgebuilders into contact. On her free weekends she accompanied them, helping translate conversations with peasants and authorities.

During the week, Toni would connect with the villagers mainly by finding ethnic Khmers and former Vietnamese Army soldiers who still spoke Khmer from the time of the war.

The Vietnamese authorities understood his undertaking and helped him and Mr. Mai Son through the legal issues. They took care of the complicated tax-free import procedures for the wire rope to be imported from Houston and Switzerland. They dedicated an entire welders team and barge crew to the task and even paid for some steel plates.

As for the pipes, hoping that someone would listen, he wrote to his contacts at Tenaris's mill in Veracruz, Mexico, requesting used tubes for a discount. To his astonishment, Tenaris not only responded positively, but sent him enough new pipes to construct 70 bridges in Southeast Asia and Ecuador entirely free of charge. From then on, the pace of Toni's bridge building dramatically increased: 70 bridges were built that year, 40 of them in Ben Tre.

Despite not knowing the language and working with a new team in thunderous rains, muddy terrain and thorny vegetation, the goal was achieved. The construction of the bridges was further complicated by the lack of roads and access to the various construction sites. All the materials had to be transported by barge on winding rivers and channels. Likewise, the peasants had to transport hundreds of tons of sand and stone from remote sandbanks and quarries by water routes.

Even though for them each day of work in the paddies is precious for their meager income, they eagerly come together to build their bridges. Normally, Toni requests fifty peasants for three days of concrete works and later two days of final assembly. In the villages



Even though working on a bridge means losing a day of work, Toni is never short of volunteers.



In the Vietnamese villages where Toni has proposed to build bridges, he has been welcomed.

of Ben Tre, however, up to 150 people would come and help. Used to strenuous labor, the peasants shout and laugh, even in the face of muddy anchor excavations, pouring rains and hard work.

Toni cites himself as being his own biggest obstacle. The reason: he had just barely recovered from a two-year full body paralysis he contracted from infected food in rural Cambodia in 2002. This rare disease, known as Guillain-Barré-Syndrome, destroys the peripheral nerve system, and it can quickly end with full lung muscles or heart failure. Within three days of getting sick, Toni was left completely paralyzed and it was uncertain if he would ever be able to walk again. With time and exercise, little by little he improved and was eventually able to get into a wheelchair. It was during this time that, with a pencil in his mouth and awkwardly typing on his laptop, he developed a software system to remotely control bridge building with his colleagues Walter in Ecuador and Sopol in Cambodia. Even during his two years of recovery in a public Thai clinic, Toni had found a way to continue building.

Toni's dream is to connect people, by building hope and dignity together. He likes to paint the bridges red because it is the color of love, or blue because of hope. Just like the bridges, love connects, and just like love, there is no bridge that separates. The people in Southeast Asia understand him easily, maybe also because Buddha himself is quoted to have said: "Special tidings will come to the makers of roads and bridges, because they serve so many people."

The Mekong

Known as the "mother of all rivers", it is the most important in this region. In Cambodia, the Mekong and the Tonle Sap or "Great Lake," dominate the life and economy of the country. In Laos, though the river is wide, the monsoon season significantly raises water levels. During this time of year, water from the Mekong overflows into the Tonle Sap and increases the size of the basin almost ten times.



Before Toni's arrival, most communities used unstable bamboo or "monkey" bridges.

The Supply Chain for the Poor

Building a bridge is not only about excavating soil, mixing concrete and tensioning cables. To reach that point, there are countless logistical issues to be solved beforehand.



Toni and his team check the calculations in his electronic bridges system before hanging cables.

Each year around 70 bridges are being built, in four difficult and far-flung locations. Toni must find and transport some 500 tons of steel and 50,000 meters of wire rope, donated mainly in Argentina, Brazil, Switzerland, Italy and Houston.

Before shipping, he must organize tax-free import permits with the customs authorities of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Ecuador. On the other hand, the logistics managers at the donor companies such as Tenaris and Ternium must pay attention to each detail on the shipping papers, lest the precious cargo be held up by customs at its final destination or at a border crossing. This requires interwoven and time-sensitive communication between many dozens of people across 12 time zones.

Somewhere, in the middle of it all, Toni sits with his laptop and cell phone, on some rickety night bus, on a bumpy road in Laos, or at a muddy riverside in Cambodia, or in a crowded and noisy internet café in Vietnam.

While in Asia, Toni received this email from a Tenaris employee in Argentina:

Jedi Master,

Hope you're well, that the Force is with you each day.

Miguel is already reserving space for the 42 tons going to Ecuador from our welded mill in Argentina. I will keep you informed.

Have the pipes from Italy arrived in Vietnam yet? Is everything OK? Let us know what needs to be done.

His answer was telling:

Querido equipazo Tenaris, (Dear Superteam)

Indeed, without the Force I wouldn't survive for long around here :-)

Fantastic your news about the pipe for Ecuador. Thousands of peasants have completed their excavations, have their sand and stone ready and are now only awaiting the pipes.

This is what Toni likes to call the "Supply Chain for the Poor": a chain of professionals giving their best, around the world, often making an extra effort, staying long into the night, or returning to the office even on the weekends. Why? Could it be that they have been touched by the spirit of bridge building?

"I met Toni for the first time in the Dong Thap province, where he came to build his first bridge in Vietnam.

He had to contact the highest authority of the People's Committee. From then on, I have supported Toni on a voluntary basis, through translation to facilitate his work with the local communities."

Tran Thi Minh Chau, Vietnamese translator







From One Bridge to Another

In Cambodia and Laos, hundreds of communities have come together, in solidarity, to continue the bridge building movement.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were all struggling to gain independence from France. In the 1960s and early 1970s all three countries were destroyed during the Vietnam War. The US Air Force dropped more tons of bombs on Laos than in all of the Second World War combined. In Vietnam, by 1973, two million Vietnamese and 58,000 US soldiers had been killed.

In Cambodia, with the withdrawal of US forces in 1975, the Khmer Rouge installed a reign of terror that resulted in one of the worst genocides of history. In 1979 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and put an end to the tyranny, driving the Khmer Rouge from power and into the mountains bordering Thailand. For the next 20 years, the Khmer Rouge fought a ruthless guerrilla war. By 1999, the Cambodian government had succeeded in convincing the last of the remaining ex-Khmer Rouge to surrender their arms and join civil society.

This is where Toni arrived in 2001 with his dream of building bridges with and for the people. The obstacles were enormous and circumstances harsh. And yet, after only a few weeks, the first few bridges were being constructed by peasants, ex-Khmer Rouge

In a country full of landmines
and with widespread
poverty, a simple bridge can
unite a community.



Pipe and wire rope for Cambodia's bridges had to be recovered and shipped in from abroad.

and government soldiers, together. Toni's will - and his experience from disaster zones in Latin America – had prevailed.

In the area of Pailín, the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge, he was aghast to see that of the 50 men coming to build, 30 had been mutilated or amputated: the consequences of past fighting and the widespread landmines. In the remote, malaria-infested district of Samlot, he had to ask a Cambodian military team to clear the landmines, forming a corridor in which to safely excavate and place anchors and towers.

His Cambodian team consists of Yin Sopul, a smart mechanic; Pen Sopoan, a former military truck driver; and Vorn Vath, a young professional welder trained by a French expatriate.

The Royal Cambodian government, by decree of Prime Minister Hun Sen, aided Toni through the creation of a National Suspension Bridge Committee. The government offered quick assistance with import permits for pipe from Thailand and used wire rope from Texas. It also recommended construction sites and put Toni in contact with local authorities – which it continues to do, seven years and 60 bridges later.

Prime Minister Hun Sen officially inaugurated the first seven bridges in 2001 during a ceremony in Battambang. On that early occasion, the Prime Minister jokingly asked Toni that he build 10 percent of all his bridges in Cambodia. True to his word, Toni has already constructed in this country 60 of his 385 footbridges, serving over 150,000 peasants in 12 provinces.

The life of the peasants has dramatically changed. Markets have sprung up near the bridges, product cultivation has increased due to permanent access to fields and markets, school attendance is not interrupted by rising rivers, deaths and disease are avoided, temples are being visited, love stories and marriages unfold unhindered, all due to simple foot bridges.



Young and old, men and women, Buddhists, Muslims and former Khmer Rouge soldiers come together.



In 2008, Ternium donated 157 tons of flat steel and Tenaris, 257 tons of tubes.

The Bridge on the Xe Noy

An account from Laos by Toni el Suizo Ruttimann

It's five o'clock in the morning in Na Than village at the Xe Noy - the River Noy - in Laos. In the house on stilts the children awake one after another. A mosquito net moves, off flies a thin blanket, and Piyá jumps up.

-Get up, get up!- he shakes Nong Sá, his younger brother. -Come with me! Quick- Last night Piyá had heard his father and the other men talk outside on the wooden floor. There had been a foreigner, too!

Piyá and Nong Sá race through the village.

-Where are we going?- shouts the little brother, excited, and out of breath.

-To the Wat!- grins the 10-year old, jumping over a puddle.

-To the temple?- Nong Sá stops short. -Why should we go to the temple?-

Moments later, they reach the wooden steps to enter the Wat's compound. Piyá scans the area, as if knowing precisely what he's looking for. Then he leaps across the steps, and sprints towards the right of the compound, past the monk's hut. He stops on the rock platform, a few feet from the edge, high above the river.

-Here!-, his eyes wide in amazement. -It's true!-

-What is true?- Nong Sá is panting.

-The wooden sticks! The TWELVE STICKS, little brother!-

-I see only eight-, says his brother, after counting slowly the neatly arranged bamboo sticks in the ground, planted as if to mark two squares. But Piyá already raced off to the back of the compound.

-Here are the other four!- he shouts in triumph, dancing around the separated bamboo sticks, one large square.

-What is this, brother? What does it mean?-

-The bridge, Nong Sá! The BRIDGE! They will build the bridge!-

Then he tells his younger brother what he had heard through the wooden wall last night, just before he fell asleep.



Markets and activity flourish around the new bridges.

The Asian Connection

New friends and volunteers, like Yin Sopul and Vorn Vath, have supported the expansion of Toni's bridge program in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.



In Yin Sopul and Vorn Vath, Toni has found the team he was looking for to help him pursue his dream in Asia. Both men have seen their share of hardship and suffering in their native Cambodia, but far from embittering them, their experiences planted in them the same desire that Toni discovered in himself over twenty years ago – the desire to do something practical to help others.



Toni's two main assistants in Southeast Asia:
Vorn Vath and Yin Sopul.

Sopul, a 45-year old mechanic, is married with three children. A humble man, but with drive and tenacity, he is Toni's right-hand man in Cambodia. As a young boy, growing up in Prey Veng in the south of Cambodia, he lived not far from the border with Vietnam. When the Vietnam War spread into Cambodia and Laos, Sopul's village was bombed to pieces by US planes. His education was one of war and survival, rather than one of school and play.

Then came the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime and its reign of terror from 1975-1979. Sopul managed to survive, close to dying of starvation like so many others. At the age of 16, he was sent to the eastern part of the country to fight in the jungle where he became very weak and sick with malaria. Finally in 1979, the Vietnamese decided to invade Cambodia to bring an end to the genocide under Pol Pot. In a matter of days, their army overran the Khmer soldiers and found a country full of starving and dying Cambodians.

At the age of 17 he began work at the Department of Public Works in Battambang, with a team dedicated to reconstructing what was left of the local roads. There he learned

motor mechanics on old British Leyland trucks and Russian ZILs, and at night he got the primary school education that he had been deprived of in his childhood.

One rainy morning in 1984, he and his workmates advanced slowly in an old truck along national road Nr. 6 riddled with potholes, from Sisophon towards Siem Reap. Sopul was seated up against a full 55-gallon barrel of gasoline. When the truck hit an anti-tank mine, it exploded in a ball of fire. Sopul found himself blasted 10 meters off the road into a paddyfield, hardly able to move, his back injured. Despite this, he managed to drag himself and other wounded survivors under a plastic sheet to shelter them from the rain. They spent four long hours waiting for rescue. At last, an old tractor appeared just as the sun was setting. In the end, Sopul was among the five who survived of the original twenty-five.

Vorn Vath also had a harsh start in life. The 35-year old welder was born just three years before the Khmer Rouge genocide and famine began. Tragically orphaned, in 1979 the Kampuchea-Hungary Friendship Orphanage became his home. After completing his primary school education, he studied welding at a vocational school run by a French ex-pat. He worked as a welder until 2001, when at the age of 26 he began working with Toni. Married with a daughter, Vath is as skinny as a rake but as strong and resistant as bamboo. And like Sopul, he is an exceptional worker. Neither of the men speaks anything other than the Cambodian language Khmer, so Toni learned to speak their language with them.

Across the border in neighboring Laos, in similar fashion, Toni put together a Lao team at end of 2007. With his crane truck driving colleague Lanh plus the welders Xai, Sai and Lae, they have already built 14 bridges in only 6 months.

“ This bridge not only connects two sides, but also almost 10,000 inhabitants in three communities. New houses and shops are being built along the access roads. Traffic is dense - 500 people cross the bridge on a daily basis.

Parents are no longer afraid to send their children to school on the bamboo ‘monkey’ bridges that were extremely dangerous when rainy season arrives.”

Mr. Le Xuan Hoa - Farm union delegate,
Ben Tre resident





In 21 years, Toni has built 381 bridges in Latin America and Southeast Asia, serving over 853,000 people.

A Network of Builders

People from all walks of life have contributed to and been touched by bridge building efforts: from businessmen, governments and soldiers to peasants.

From Latin America to Asia, Toni has left his mark on the terrain as well as on the hearts of thousands of grateful people. He works autonomously; he is not part of any organization, company or government.

This does not impede Toni from inviting others to help construct bridges. He has received hundreds of tons of steel pipe from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Mining and Energy, steel plates, transportation aid and welding assistance from provincial governments in Vietnam, wire rope from a company in Houston and hundreds of kilometers of rope from Swiss cable cars and ski lifts– among other things.

Tenaris and Ternium are contributors to this enormous effort. To date, the former has donated 400 tons of tubes and the latter has provided over 100 tons of flat steel. The friendship between Toni and Tenaris began in 2001 when its manufacturing center in Mexico donated steel tubes to erect 28 bridges throughout the state of Veracruz. After a successful first experience, Tenaris decided to continue its support of Toni's global efforts, sending pipes to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Ecuador. Ternium joined in 2007, sending flat steel for nearly 50 bridges in Cambodia and Laos.

Until now, peasants in 11 different countries have excavated at least 15,000 tons of soil by hand, carried 24,000 tons of sand and stone, mixed 60,000 bags of cement and have contributed a total of 300,000 man/hours of work.

For 21 years, Toni has been guiding and inspiring communities that believe in their own capacity and want to improve their own conditions by assembling bridges together, in solidarity.



Toni, with members of the bridge building committee in Ben Tre, Vietnam.

