

Toni Ruttimann, Bridge Builder for the World

An Update

By Roberto Mori

There were a few moments of unnatural silence before the almost 1,000 Delegates granted the Speaker with an endless standing ovation (more than 5 minutes!).

Those who had the privilege of being there, vividly remember the key-note presentation by Toni Ruttimann, the Swiss bridge builder, at the opening ceremony of the 22nd IPMA World Congress in Roma (November 9th, 2008). Indeed Toni had delivered a touching and impressive example of the unbelievable achievements that determination, creativity, initiative along with deeply rooted human values could lead to.

In the long time elapsed since, Toni has continued helping people in South America and South-East Asia to build bridges that significantly improve the quality and safety of their lives. His record to date includes 730 bridges serving 2 Million persons, which have been built together with the interested populations in Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Costa Rica, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia.



One of Toni's bridges in Nam Tee, Kachin State, Myanmar

The Times of London has defined him as *one of the world's more elusive heroes*.

On the occasion of a recent Toni's visit to Italy, both an association for active citizenship of Arese – a center of 25,000 inhabitants very close to Milano, famous for its Alfa Romeo Museum and former Alfa Romeo premises – and a local newspaper organized two presentations of his that have registered an overall audience of 1,300.

Toni's activity has been introduced by the newspaper Director as *a dedication to a unique mission*. Indeed his dedication and motivation are as astonishing as the related achievements. *Stand up and let's build it together*: this way Toni has motivated and led peasants, women, kids until *their own bridges* have been completely built.



Another of Toni's bridges in Taungkyar, Sagaing, Myanmar

The project management professionals attending the presentations in Arese enjoyed another reason for admiration as they could appreciate the competences applied by Toni to achieve such unbelievable feats.

In fact the related professional approach is an example of excellent project management and teamwork through the following major steps:

- Identification and training of his local colleague in each country, to accompany him for surveys, cementations and final construction, and who after years of experience at Toni's side also becomes responsible for future maintenance needs in the country.
- Selection and continuous training for a team of skilled welders in each country.
- Participation and commitment of local communities in all the construction phases under Toni's and his colleague's supervision.

- Worldwide retrieval and transport of all needed used and new steel pipes and used wire ropes, nowadays donated mainly by Tenaris pipe company and the Swiss mountain cable-cars, respectively.
- Standardization of bridge design, organization & management of pre-fabrication sites, and his own repetitive tasks for remote control and mobile management.
- Strict procedures for all people involved, aiming at what Toni calls 'triple zero system': zero accidents, zero mistakes and zero waste (of people, materials and time involved). And incredibly, so far there have been no serious accidents on any of the 730 bridges, even though each village builds their suspension bridge for the first time. That is an outstanding example of successful application of the basic project rule of doing things well the first time.
- Teamwork under very precise rules, especially on final assembly day of the bridge, clearly explained to all villagers prior to work start and strictly followed by all.

The above are project management principles that sometime are lacking even in big industrial projects.

The presentations have obviously been characterized by highly emotional content, also because Toni has clarified which is the main driver for all his purely altruistic and voluntary activities: for him the privilege of being a human being is best lived by helping others who are in need.

Of particular satisfaction is the fact that the presentations have been attended by many young people, even kids, as evidence that the main recipients of Toni's message should be the young generations so that they could verify how far motivation and spirit can take us, how and where talents may be found and developed, how solid ethic-moral values can provide a decisive edge to achieve demanding goals, how continuous search for innovation can strongly facilitate such an achievement.

Some of the many comments received after the presentations clearly reflect the mood inspired by Toni:

- *I have had the great pleasure to know a real hero, strictly invisible, who in two hours only has enriched our hearts.*
- *Ruttimann travels to the most humble places in the world to realize what nobody else would do: bridges leading to hospitals, schools and fields to cultivate.*

- *Yesterday evening I have learnt that everyone has a bridge to build and bring together what was before far and separated, and that we all must take conscience of the privilege of being human beings.*
- *Thanks for the coordinates Love/Light, thanks for the bridge you have built last evening between you and us.*
- *Would like that all my students could attend this testimony.*
- *He has dedicated his life to others, building bridges, breaking down barriers, bringing people closer, to have Love winning against Fear.*
- *Here he is, not as you would imagine an outstanding international personality: simple, not at all filling the scene.*

His voice volume is low, we feel a bit uncomfortable for the effort that is required to listen ... but slowly you realize that just such an effort is bringing you towards him. He does not want to throw his knowledge and experience upon you; he, calm and reserved, gives it to you as a gift, only if you so wish.

(...)

He realizes that sometime the simplest things are the most important ones, that an even small river can prevent people from joining. It would be enough to build a bridge... and he becomes a bridge builder.

(...)

And now the Toni of the beginning of the evening, the measured one who seemed a bit in the shadow, the one without homeland, without salary, who lives on the hospitality of those communities with whom he builds their bridge, invisibly, is gone, transformed into a giant full of light, a great light, the one that for him is the objective to reach, moving ever farther away from darkness and ever pointing to the high. And we, used to loud voices and loudly trumpeted non-thoughts, to chaos and confusion in place of strong projects, find ourselves in love with whom has chosen the silence, the essential, the lack of personal interest, the doing, the acting, the building of bridges, both real and metaphorical ones.

We cannot but stand up and offer him, through the sound of clapping hands and beating hearts, a thank you for what he has whispered and transmitted to us.

This period of the world is characterized by more and more walls, physical and metaphorical, that in Toni's view fall in the Dark and Fear area of his personal coordinates: but just one of his bridges is enough to jump to the Love and Light quadrant.



Bridge building at Koh Krosang, Pursat, Cambodia



Aiklian and Toni, Po Oo, Myanmar



Toni and Aiklian, Sar Taung, Myanmar

Thank you, Toni, from all the persons in the world who, without hidden agendas, would aim for a more equal and just global society!

Toni Ruttimann Mini Bio

Toni Ruttimann is a bridge-builder: since 1987 when he left his home country, Switzerland, to help the populations in Ecuador hit by a devastating earthquake, he has devoted his life to building bridges in disadvantaged regions of the Earth, voluntarily, freely, independently.

First in Latin America, then in South-East Asia Toni has designed a “system” that reduces a complex sequence of activities to their essential: the population needing the bridge contributes the necessary manpower and materials for the foundations, such as cement, sand and gravel, whereas Toni takes care of the supply of pipes and ropes from his friends around the world, plus giving his technical expertise on site. During the first 18 years in Latin America the used pipes and ropes were sourced from the oil industry, but since 2005 the Italian-Argentinian Group Tenaris is donating the pipes, either new or used, for all the bridges anywhere, while the Swiss cableways provide their used wire ropes, when replaced due to very high safety standards, but still in excellent conditions for bridge building.

In each country Toni sets up and trains a minimal team of 4 local welders and one bridge-builder colleague to work with him, and who eventually becomes responsible of future bridge maintenance.

Together with his colleagues and the interested populations, Toni has built 730 bridges, serving 2 million people (data as of 31 March 2016).

Some photos from Tonis’ presentation in Arese, Italy.



Toni Ruttimann introduced in Arese by Roberto Mori



Toni speaking to crowd in Arese



Toni's warm appreciation from the Mayor of Arese

About the Author



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Roberto Mori has an extensive background in Project Management of international turn-key projects of industrial plants, oil & gas and iron & steel sectors. He has covered several functions in project teams, up to the roles of Senior Project Manager, Projects Director and Portfolio Manager. His background includes also experience as Procurement Director and Operations Manager for the same type of projects portfolio. Today he is Director Special Projects in **Tenova**, one of the world's leaders for iron, steel, mining and material handling technologies.

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Roberto Mori has been member of the Italian National Association of Plant Engineering (ANIMP) since the early 90's, taking major part in the activities performed by its Project Management Section, IPMA Italy, of which he was President until February 2015. Information about ANIMP can be found at www.animp.it/IPMA

He was Chairman of International Project Management Association (IPMA) 2013- 2014, after having served as Vice President and President for four years. He has been Prize Winner of the IPMA Project Excellence Award 2006 and obtained the IPMA Otto Ziegler's Award for Excellent Project Management Performance in 2008. Today he is member of the Jury for IPMA Project Excellence Awards. More about IPMA at www.ipma.ch

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