

Overview

Immersion: something is happening

by ROBERT CHAMBERS

This issue of *Participatory Learning and Action* on immersion has no precedent. There have been earlier issues devoted to special topics. But none of its 56 predecessors have focused as this one does on the heart of development awareness, commitment, and practice. The experiences described here inspire and disturb. They challenge us professionally, institutionally, and personally. They show that, quietly, something with immense promise has been happening and is gathering momentum. They drive us to ask how much immersion could transform the quality of what is done in the name of development.

What are we talking about?

As the contributions in this issue show, immersion can take many forms. There is no template or formula. Some are self-organised or even spur-of-the-moment; some are organised with a programme. Some are open-ended for experiential learning; others are thematic, designed to focus on and learn about a topic or sector. Some are personal and individual; others more usually are in groups. An almost universal feature is, though, staying in a poor community, as a person, living with a host family, helping with tasks and sharing in their life. This can be for any number of days or nights, often between 1 and 10, with 3 or 4 perhaps most common. The overnight

stay is vital for relationships, experience, and relaxed conversations after dark. Even when immersion is thematic, they are usually quite open-ended. There may be activities like working with and helping the family, listening and dialogue, learning a life history, keeping a reflective diary, or trying to explain your work and its relevance. But the essence is to be open to the unplanned and unexpected, to live and be, and relate as a person. The unplanned incident is so often the most striking, moving, and significant. Much is experienced and learnt, but what that will be is hard to predict beforehand.

For all this the term **immersion** has come to be used: the visitor is immersed in daily life, having left behind the baggage of role, organisation, and importance, and stays for days and nights in a community. There is room for other related activities and terms to express them. For Sida in Bangladesh (**Jupp et al**) **reality check** is used for an innovative listening study with immersion that gathers information from structured dialogues with poor people. Different activities and expressions are fine as long as we say how we are using them. Here, I shall stick to **immersion**, including within that term activities with other names such as **EDPs** – immersion of the Exposure and Dialogue Programme (**Osner, Möller, Hilgers**) – and **Ashish Shah's reality check** of 'checking your work, ideology, and practice against the realities that poor citizens face.'

DFID staff work in the field for the host family collecting mulberry leaves, during an ActionAid immersion in China.



Photo: ActionAid

A gathering momentum

Especially over the past decade, immersions have been evolving quietly and gathering momentum. The build up has been slow but steady. Antecedents include the participant observation of social anthropologists. During the past few decades, increasing numbers of organisations have promoted and adopted immersions. Some, if not all, of the more prominent ones are represented in this volume.

The major early initiative was taken by Karl Osner who pioneered the Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP). Starting in the 1980s, there have now been 77 EDPs with almost 1000 participants (German parliamentarians, senior officials, leaders from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector, aid agency, and government staff) in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and South Eastern Europe. SEWA (the Self Employed Women's Association), a very large trade union of poor women in India, has since 1991 been hosting EDPs for others (Kanbur, Fields, Patel), and

using them for its own staff since 1999 (Nanavaty, Shroff). After he became President of the World Bank in 1995, James Wolfensohn introduced immersions as part of the Harvard executive development programme for senior staff of the Bank (Nunes, Isa, Bresnyan). The EDP, SEWA, and World Bank streams came together in Ravi Kanbur's seminal immersion when he was leading the preparation of the World Development Report 2000 on development and poverty: part of his account of that experience follows this opening piece.

Then, in Sweden, the Global School has for years had a programme of 6 annual Global Journeys, each with 20 to 25 teachers spending 10 days with a rural family. These have been in various countries including Bangladesh, where they have been facilitated by the national NGO Proshika (Kramsjo). In several countries including India and Kenya, staff of ActionAid International have over the years practised immersions (Samuel, Shah) and now organise them for others (Awori, Eyben, Thomson, Ruparel). National NGOs use them for their

own staff (**Kumar and Haridarkee, PRADAN HRD Unit and Jamkar**). Among bilateral donors, a few DfID staff have taken part (**Oswald**). SDC has pioneered an intensive form of participatory research for staff in Tanzania, living and working with a very poor family for a day (**Jupp**). But it is Sida that has taken the lead, blazing the trail for others (**Nilsson et al, Sandkull and Schill, Jupp et al**). With senior staff experience and backing, Sida has officially endorsed and promoted immersions for its staff.

What immersions give

Some immersions have specific purposes. There are thematic immersions designed to focus on one sector or aspect of development, sometimes with organised programmes. There are immersions used for:

- project monitoring (**Isa**);
- for familiarisation in a new post, as when ActionAid India organised one for a newly arrived British High Commissioner;
- for experiential realism as part of a conference, as organised by SEWA for WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising);
- for the selection, induction, and capacity building of staff in India by various NGOs (**Kumar and Haridarkee, PRADAN HRD Unit and Jamkar, Shroff, Nanavaty**); and
- for programme development at the community level as by Plan Bangladesh (**Yakub and Islam**).

Agreement seems universal that immersions give insights and experiences that are not accessible in other ways. Those who participate learn in a personal way about people's lives, livelihoods, and cultures, and the conditions they experience. The world can be seen the other way round, from the perspective of people living in poverty. It is expressed in many ways and by many phrases – 'face-to-face', 'walking in their shoes', or 'putting a face on poverty'. This ground-truthing provides a touchstone to refer to, and a source of confidence, and the conviction of authority based on personal experience. On her return to IDS, Rosalind Eyben asked how discussions in a programme review connected with the lives of her hosts in a village in Ghana. This led her to make points she would not otherwise have made. Personal witness statements can often work to build up credibility and convincing ideas, communication, and arguments (**Nilsson et al**). Katy Oswald said that her experience in an immersion in China gave her:

the confidence to talk about poverty in rural China with some personal authority. You often come up against people who are ignorant of the level of poverty that still exists in

"...the essence is to be open to the unplanned and unexpected, to live and be, and relate as a person. The unplanned incident is so often the most striking, moving, and significant."

rural China and now, as well as referring to the statistics, I can refer to my own personal experience.

Quite often there are stark and startling insights, including:

- **Ravi Kanbur's** 'master of Mohadi' incident which he says 'encapsulated for me the gap between macro-level strategies and ground-level realities';
- the realisation by **Olof Sandkull** and **Göran Schill**, through their immersion with a tsunami-affected family, that in the second 'tsunami', of foreign funds, those who had lost most received least;
- **Gary Fields** revising his professional economist's view of the impacts on poor producers of the minimum wage; and
- a participant in an HIV/AIDS-related immersion in Western Kenya who said 'I've learnt more about HIV/AIDS and its impact in the last 24 hours than I have in the last 6 years that AIDS affected my family' (**Shah**).

Impact on policy is also stressed:

*The experiences gained from the immersions made a crucial impact on the direction of the forthcoming country strategy, steering it towards a sharpened poverty focus and a commitment to participatory research (reality checks) as a means of gaining insights into the perspectives of people living in poverty (**Nilsson et al**).*

All this is enough to justify immersions over and over again. If this were all, the case would already be overwhelming. But people repeatedly say they gained much more than just useful insights and knowledge. They stress, and often give more importance to, the experiential learning, the personal and emotional impact. This resonates with other expressed purposes. **Fred Nunes** writes that James Wolfensohn 'wanted managers who had heart as well as intellect'. The aim was to '...rekindle the staff's passion for poverty reduction.' **Bosse Kramsjo** asks how thinking and intellectual shifts can happen without complete involvement. Göran Holmqvist (in **Nilsson et al**) says that his immersion offered what he most hoped for, 'an alternative way of learning,

“Agreement seems universal that immersions give insights and experiences that are not accessible in other ways. Those who participate learn in a personal way about people’s lives, livelihoods, and cultures, and the conditions they experience. The world can be seen the other way round, from the perspective of people living in poverty.”

through emotional exposure rather than conventional intellect.’ He had been given a ‘gut feeling’ of the life and perspectives of the people he lived with. **John Samuel** writes of his immersions as intense personal moments: ‘They make me restless but hopeful. They disturb me deeply, but at the same time recharge me. More than anything they challenge me.’ For **Koy Thomson**, having the time and space for unlearning was important. For **Taaka Awori**:

The immersion has helped me grow as a development practitioner, but more importantly as a person. It was a very different way of learning for me because I learnt experientially. In that sense, all of me was learning, not just my mind, as is usually the case. The immersion allowed me to stop analysing people living in poverty as objects of development, but rather just to be with them and allow the learning to emerge.

The best should not be the enemy of the good; and many immersions may not be such deep experiences, or so transformational. No one should feel they have somehow failed if their experiences seem less remarkable or moving than those described in this collection. Immersions can be serious but also inspiring, and can have their lighter side, with laughter, fun, singing, and dancing. What matters, the accounts that follow suggest, is heart as well as mind, an open and learning frame of mind and being. For **Qazi Azmat Isa**, ‘immersion allows profound learning.’ Of the SDC participatory research with poor families in Tanzania, Dee Jupp (**Jupp et al**) writes:

The outcomes of the exercise were extraordinary. Not only was a wealth of insights into the life of poor households gathered, but the experience turned out to be transformational for many of the research team.

Why did immersions not take off earlier?

If these experiences can mean so much and make such a difference, why have they not spread more and been more widely adopted? It seems so evident that they should be part of responsible personal and professional practice. They cost less than going to a workshop. They take little time – usually not more than a week. It is not as though most organisations lack money: funds for training, capacity building, and professional development are frequently under spent.

Three clusters of forces stand out as explanations.

The first is personal. It is easy to make excuses, especially being too busy with important work. But this does not stand up to scrutiny. There is time for a workshop, within our comfort zones, but not for an immersion which is outside, unfamiliar, threatening (**Ruparel**). For myself, I am reluctant to give up what is known, cosy, and controllable for the unknown, perhaps uncomfortable and uncontrollable. I fear behaving badly and making a fool of myself. And here I and others must thank Ravi Kanbur for his ‘I don’t think I want to go to that temple any more’ (in **Birch et al**). This makes it easier for me to acknowledge my own shameful mistake, so hurtful to our host lady in Gujarat, of going to sleep instead of meeting the people who had come across the desert to meet us. And there are other arguments that can be mustered: ‘I know all about that. I grew up in a village (or slum). I don’t have anything to learn about that’ (**Shah**). Against which can be set the reflections of participants in Views of the Poor (**Jupp**):

I thought I knew about village life as my roots are in the village and I still visit family in my village from time to time. But I know nothing about what it is like to be poor and how hidden this kind of poverty can be.

The second cluster of forces is institutional. These are so many: values and incentives that reward writing good memoranda and reports and speaking well in meetings with important people; and the low value given to listening to the unimportant poor. There are senior staff who regard immersions as frivolous, useless or voyeurism, and/or feel personally threatened by them. There are normal pressures of work and other perceived priorities. Bureaucratic culture looks inwards and upwards, not downwards and outwards.

A third force is current rhetoric about development relations. For lender and donor agencies, there has been the convenient political correctness of government ownership. For international NGOs there has been increasing reliance on the insights of partners who are supposedly close to poverty.

Photos: Tom Sharman



Joining in with the village celebrations.



Joining in with the traditional dance routines.

To seek direct personal experience through immersions could then be thought of as untrusting and interfering.

These personal, institutional, and rhetorical forces combine. Any organisations or individuals who want excuses for not pressing for immersions have no difficulty finding them. It is not difficult, then, to understand why until recently effective demand for immersions has not been strong.

Why now?

The evidence presented in the articles of this issue would have made a powerful case for immersions at any time in the past. With hindsight, one can lament that development decade after decade has gone by without their adoption. But the contemporary case for making them standard practice for development professionals is now even stronger than ever. This is for three reasons.

First, changes in the conditions, awareness, priorities, and needs of poor people are changing faster than ever before. Almost everywhere, social change is accelerating. There is then a continuous and intensifying challenge to policy makers and practitioners to keep in touch and up to date.

Second, in very recent years, a new simplistic certainty has infiltrated some development thinking and practice. The downside of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and of the inspiring movement to Make Poverty History, has been the belief that 'we know what needs to be done' (especially in Africa) – and that the solution is more money. The issues are not so simple; nor in most cases are the solutions. For vital ground-truthing, immersions provide one means of checking against the complex and diverse realities of poor people.

Third, the grip of the urban and capital traps has tight-

ened, for government, official aid agency, and international NGO staff alike. They are tied down by more and more meetings, negotiations, emails, and reports, often with fewer staff; by participation in the pandemic of incestuous workshops, many of them about poverty; by discussions around donors' budget support, sector-wide programmes, and harmonisation on policy issues, all of this in what **Koy Thomson** calls our 'self-referential universe.' **Qazi Azmat Isa** speaks for other agencies too when he notes that 'increasingly, World Bank staff are confined to government departments in capital and provincial cities, removed from the reality of poverty and from our ultimate clients – the poor of the country.'

Immersions are means to offset these biases and trends: to keep up to date; to be in touch; to escape the self-referential trap. It is fitting and fortunate that they are rising fast on the agenda. As this issue of *PLA* shows, they are now better understood. They are more talked about and easier to arrange. More organisations – EDP, SEWA, ActionAid, Praxis, Proshika – are providing them for others. More people and more organisations are setting them up for themselves. The increasing numbers of people who have experienced immersions, and the conviction, commitment, and authority with which they can speak, encourage others. We appear to be approaching a critical mass of experience, stories, buzz, communications, and enthusiasm. Immersions are increasingly recognised as good professional practice that must be encouraged and supported, and more and more people have made them a regular personal practice (e.g. **Osner, Kanbur, Fields, Samuel, Ruparel, Shah**).

So now, in the 21st century, after 6 decades of 'development', immersions are more needed than ever; and may at last be at a tipping point, about to take off.

“This demands vision, leadership, guts, and priority. It means that ministers, permanent and principal secretaries, chief executives, and senior managers, in aid agencies, governments, and NGOs, must set examples through their own immersions and make space for others to do likewise.”

So what?

The implications are quietly revolutionary. The experiences in this issue of *PLA* challenge the imagination. Read the contributions and ask yourself: what would have happened if the experiential learning and reflection of immersions and reality checks had been the norm of good practice by development professionals over past decades? Would the deprivations, suffering, and death inflicted on poor people by structural adjustment have been perpetrated if those responsible had spent a few days and nights immersed in a poor affected community? Might not those responsible have put a face and a person on the human price and sought other policies? To be more realistically pro-poor, could there conceivably have been any more cost-effective use of their time than an immersion? The gratuitous suffering that might have been averted blows the mind.

And what about us, now?

What would those living in poverty want us to do? Would they, as Koy Thomson has asked ‘express their amazement that people who are experts in poverty don’t even bother to spend time with them’? As he observes, ‘For a development organisation to see 4 days simply being with people living

in poverty as a luxury is a sign of pathology.’ The question is not whether the direct experiential learning of immersions and reality checks can be afforded. It is whether anyone in any organisation committed to the MDGs, social justice, and reducing poverty, can justify not affording and making space for them. Should they follow Göran Schill who began as a sceptic, and then after 3 days and nights with a tsunami-affected family exclaimed that ‘Everyone at Sida should do an immersion!?’

The cumulative evidence presented in this special issue drives us – however reluctantly and with whatever discomfort – to see personal experiential learning, face-to-face, with those we seek to serve as a key missing link in development practice. Wriggle though we may, the conclusion, the message, is there: to be serious about poverty, we have to be serious about immersions.

This demands vision, leadership, guts, and priority. It means that ministers, permanent and principal secretaries, chief executives, and senior managers, in aid agencies, governments, and NGOs, must set examples through their own immersions and make space for others to do likewise. It means that, like Sida, other organisations must make immersions official policy and encourage or require staff to undertake them. It means too that time for them must be ring-fenced to avoid postponements or cancellations, and that resources must be made available. In sum, politically, and as policy and practice, immersions have to be given priority.

So the final discomfiting question is this. After the testimony and evidence of this special issue, can any of us make a credible case for not doing immersions? And if we cannot, what are we going to do about it?

Will we, can we, rise to the challenge and seize the opportunity? And if we do, more and more, may that over the years transform the quality of what we do and what happens in the name of development?

CONTACT DETAILS

Robert Chambers
Participation, Power and Social Change Team
Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex
Brighton
BN1 9RE
UK.
Tel: +44 1273 606261
Fax: +44 1273 621202 or 691647
Email: r.chambers@ids.ac.uk