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# The World Bank Group: investing in poverty immersions

by FREDERICK E. NUNES

**Why would a leading public international organisation venture into an immersion programme for its managers? How difficult is it to organise and sustain such a programme? What are some of the challenges of sustaining it? And what lessons might we learn from the experience?**

**This paper describes the efforts of the World Bank Group in trying to learn through immersion experiences.**

## Background: the need for change

In 1995, James 'Jim' Wolfensohn became the new president of the World Bank. He sought to learn about the Bank's work by visiting several countries and becoming familiar with its operations. He met many unpleasant surprises but in more than a few cases was impressed with the resourcefulness of the technical and managerial staff.

Within the institution, he was shocked by the stability of the Bank's staff – the very low turnover and the low investment in renewal needed to deepen technical knowledge and strengthen managerial competence.

Jim initiated a drive to rekindle the staff's passion for poverty reduction, open the institution to outside ideas, urge staff to work in partnerships with other development agen-

cies, put more staff in country offices, encourage staff to work with sub-sovereign agencies, and engage with civil society.

One of his major initiatives was the creation of a new executive development programme. This was an expensive venture involving a consortium of institutions. It eventually became known as the Harvard programme. The programme consisted of three 2-week modules spread over about 7 months. To expose the managers to more non-Bank experiences, about a fifth of the participants in each class were managers from other development agencies, private industry, non-governmental organisations, and government departments.

The expectation was that the Bank's managers would learn from the guests and the guests would appreciate the challenges of development that the Bank faced. Sadly, the managers learnt very little from their guests. In one module after another the guests would give the same message: 'Why do you guys talk so much? You seldom invite our views. You never listen to us and you are so intent on stating your own views.'

The Harvard programme catered to the strengths of the Bank's managers. The case-based programme exercised their analytical skills. It played to their desire to put their intellect

on parade. It invited them into debate. And it nurtured their appetite to compete. They enjoyed it immensely. But far from changing their behaviour, it simply reinforced their already considerable skills in advocacy. They listened even less.

### **Immersion: bridging the gap**

One of the organisers of the Harvard programme had recently returned to the Bank and was catching up on Jim's new initiatives. On reading Jim's speeches, it was clear to him that the Harvard programme was not delivering the sort of manager Jim was describing in his speeches. Jim wanted managers who had heart as well as intellect; who cared about 'the smile on the face of a child'; who had a first-hand appreciation of the poverty they were seeking to eliminate and therefore a sense of urgency about the task.

But the Harvard programme was all intellect. The organiser couldn't connect the lofty analysis taking place in the programme and the grim reality of poverty. Feeling this gap, he wrote to his immediate manager, Tariq Hussein, suggesting the need for the participants to spend some time living in a poor community, gaining a completely different appreciation of poverty – not one based on intellect, but one rooted in experience. He thought that his paper would be discussed, the idea refined and thoughtfully explored and, with luck, implemented.

The next morning the manager instructed him to 'do it'. Tariq had had dinner with Jim and described the idea to him, and Jim was ecstatic. When the fellow who wrote the note protested that there was no budget, Tariq insisted: 'Good ideas don't wait around for budgets. Get on with it.'

Before any arrangements were in place, Jim was telling the managers that he was himself going on an immersion and that his wife, Elaine, would be with him. He expected all of them to do it. The immersion would be mandatory and no one would graduate from the Harvard programme unless they had done the 'seventh' week.

### **Challenges and responses**

Few things are certain in the World Bank's culture, but one certainty is that to label anything 'mandatory' is to give it the kiss of death. So even before the programme was formed it faced a huge up-hill challenge.

The programme became known as GRIP – Grass Roots Immersion Programme. Persuading the managers of the merits of the programme was no easy task: 'I come from a poor country. I know what poverty is. What is this romantic nonsense?' Or, as another said, 'This is shameful "poverty tourism". It's sheer voyeurism. We will not fit in. We will be

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a burden. This is a mockery.' And another: 'Look, I grew up in a poor village; I worked very hard to get out of there – and I am not going back!'

These were not pleasant exchanges. But it soon became evident that these reactions were often masking perfectly justifiable concerns about security, health, sanitation, and privacy. They were being asked to step into a world they knew only at a safe distance. Further, some of them had medical conditions that would have made the immersion far too risky.

Perhaps the most difficult message about the immersion to get over was that participants were going there to listen, to observe, and to learn from their hosts. This was almost unfathomable. They were so steeped in their role of development expert and so practised in their skill of being active that the idea of being a quiet observer was a source of acute distress: 'What am I supposed to contribute?' The idea of reflection was alien. We had to steer folk away from going to visit their favourite projects. This was not about projects; it was about people and their survival in poverty.

The organisers themselves had no great knowledge of how to arrange immersion programmes. We had to find contacts in the field. We had to locate trustworthy grass-roots organisations that could manage the logistics, organise safe accommodation, support participants' language needs, provide suitable orientation, ensure an immersion for meaningful learning, and schedule a constructive debrief so participants could reflect on their learning. Groups would have to be small so that each individual would have his or her own experience and not unduly disrupt the host-household. But the participants would need to meet in order to share their learning experiences.

We moved ahead by trial and error. We were attempting to introduce immersions on a global scale but regions are not equally endowed with strong national non-governmental organisations. Nor were all countries open to the idea of poverty immersion programmes; some were very sensi-

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tive and were unhappy with Bank staff going deep into the countryside. We consciously aimed at national rather than international NGOs. We found very strong ones in South Asia. Some had organised programmes for parliamentarians and had developed highly sophisticated processes. On our side, we had to be clear about the learning we wanted. Unless we could be clear about our learning outcomes the host NGO could hardly design immersions to meet our needs.

Over time we became clearer about the learning outcomes. We wanted our participants to leave with:

- respect for their host families;
- an appreciation of the importance of listening;
- a recognition of their hosts’ problem-solving skills;
- a clearer appreciation of the integration of poverty and of the futility of single-sector interventions, e.g. roads, education, health, credit;
- a stronger sense of the vulnerability of the poor; and
- an understanding of the potential for disconnections between national policies and poverty reduction.

### Head + heart = behaviour change

The GRIP emerged from our recognition of the limitations of our Harvard-based executive management development programme to deliver the behaviour changes we sought in the Bank managers. Much of the detailed work that transformed the idea of immersions into a programme resulted from the hard work of Maury Sterns, a staff trainer who had been a Peace Corps Volunteer.

The GRIP was not the only immersion initiative. When a new Regional Vice-President, Mieko Nishimuzu, made a visit to the region she was to lead, she did not limit herself to the cities or government offices. She visited health clinics, schools and agricultural projects in rural communities. On her return to the Bank she was struck by the difficulty she had in sharing her experience with others. This led her to organise other similar visits for teams, including nationals in country offices. These experiences were rich for the variety of participants involved.

One of the challenges in organising immersions is finding the balance between ensuring the participants’ safety and providing an authentic experience. If participants are so well cared for by the host NGO that they merely visit sites, are moved around in air-conditioned vehicles, and return to the safety of the NGO’s facilities, then what we have is more correctly an NGO-immersion as opposed to a village-immersion. This is not an easy call to make. There is also real benefit in NGO-immersion for public international institutions which commonly work with governments. They see how NGOs operate and this is often an eye-popping education in simplicity, practicality, and the use of resources.

As we experimented with different arrangements and searched for partners, we slowly learnt of the silent enthusiastic support both within and outside the organisation. Those with expertise offered their support. Country directors in the field volunteered to find local NGOs. National and international non-governmental organisations provided operational support and academics interested in experiential learning joined our effort. But most important of all, those managers who participated in the programme spoke with their colleagues about the profound impact of their learning during their immersion:

*I’ve worked on education for years; but visiting an NGO’s school in a really poor community gave me an entirely different perspective. We have a great deal to learn from them.*

*I guess my big learning is that the poor are not passive. I saw enormous creativity, a huge capacity for hard work, and commitment to family.*

*I saw the interdependence between our different sectors in front of me – water, health, education, agriculture, transportation, credit, markets, housing, security – you name it, they all came together.*

*In a health centre, I watched a mother cuddle a child. I knew the child would die in a few hours. And there was nothing I could do. Child mortality statistics will never be the same to me.*

But in a hard-nosed development agency, full of people who see themselves as experts, the real value of a poverty immersion cannot lie in its soft face. The immersion must yield practical business value. It must result in more effective projects and programmes. For this transition to occur, the immersion needs to be more deeply tied to the line busi-

ness. In other words, responsibility for the programme must migrate from human resources (HR) and 'learning' to the regions and 'operations'. That is where the real lasting traction lies and that is where the real challenges have to be faced. Only one regional vice-president, Praful Patel, has taken immersions seriously and tried to move them ahead. He has also included government counterparts in the programmes in his region.

The World Bank Group's commitment to decentralisation calls for more effective interventions at the local level. Its move into more sub-sovereign lending and more direct action at municipal and community levels beg for greater skills in participatory methodologies and in listening to local people. There are compelling reasons for the Bank and other international development agencies to take on the struggle of learning how immersion experiences might enrich and strengthen their effectiveness. The reach for 'results on the ground' is further reason to seek to learn in a different way – from listening carefully to the intended beneficiaries of our efforts.

### Lessons learnt

What are some of the lessons that we might identify from our limited experience?

- Seek broad buy-in at the senior management level, especially at the operational level. Do not rely on the enthusiastic response of a single executive.
- Quietly seek out allies. Do not be deterred by the loud noises of resistance. Face the challenges head-on.
- Keep it simple. Do not unduly complicate the preparation for the immersion.
- Organising immersions requires considerable attention to detail. Form a partnership with a colleague who enjoys working on details and who has a temperament for persistence.
- Do not try to develop the expertise of immersion in-house. Find organisations which have a proven track record and work with them.
- Involve country offices as early as possible. Have them help in finding reputable, local NGOs. Have them invite national

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counterparts to share the experience.

- While international NGOs are obviously attractive for global reach, try to find suitable national NGOs wherever possible.
- Seek to move the immersion from an HR 'learning' agenda to an operational 'learning-through-doing' business face.

### Looking to the future

The real challenge for the World Bank Group is to move from conducting a few isolated immersion programmes towards institutionalising immersions – to make them stick as a routine feature of development organisations. Unless the Bank Group's senior leadership is convinced that an immersion programme could make a meaningful contribution to its search for greater development effectiveness, there is no future for immersions in the institution. That has simply not yet happened. But it could. The Group has recently endured its most awkward leadership crisis and has to radically transform its image with donor and borrower countries alike. In its new president, Bob Zoellick, the Bank now has an exceptionally well-qualified leader. It needs a new platform of legitimacy and a new sense of authenticity.

The Bank is still searching for an effective process for capturing, using, and sharing its vast global knowledge. It has to learn to operate in a far more decentralised way. It has to learn to foster far more effective partnerships. It has to learn how to knit its several narrow strands of expertise together in designing programmes. And it has to learn to deliver demonstrably positive results on the ground. It must bridge the enormous gap between its operations and the poor people whose lives it seeks to transform. Immersion programmes are not a panacea – but they do offer an in-your-face microcosm of the real challenges of development.

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