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The World Bank's Village Immersion Programme in South Asia

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This article describes the experiential learning programmes developed by the World Bank in South Asia. These programmes provide a 'reality check' for World Bank staff and staff from other organisations, including government officials. They also enable participants to understand the impact of policies at local level. World Bank staff in the South Asia Region are now using immersion programmes to monitor the impact of World Bank projects, and the region is planning a further series of immersion programmes for new managers and other staff.

About the Village Immersion Programme (VIP)

The Village Immersion Programme (VIP) is the name used in the South Asia Region for what the rest of the World Bank calls the Grassroots Immersion Programme (GRIP) (see Fred Nunes, this section). The VIP was conceived as an unstructured training programme of 'experiential' learning that put Bank staff in the shoes of their clients, namely the poor of the region, by spending days and nights with them in their villages. The VIP exposes staff to the hardships of life with inadequate health facilities and education, insufficient nutrition, lack of water supply and roads, low agricultural yields, lack of non-farm opportunities, and persistent poverty

despite best efforts.

As well as this 'reality checking', the VIP offers an opportunity to view the impacts of policy at the village level, to see how inclusive or exclusive these are, to understand the political and socio-cultural barriers to inclusion, to see gaps and overlaps in services, and to identify where there is a need for partnerships, integration between sectors, and policy change.

VIP coordinators in the different country offices partner with NGOs to plan and facilitate the programme. They select villages based on levels of poverty and prevailing conditions, and NGOs provide facilitators who stay with participants and act as translators.

Spread of the VIP

The VIP was initiated in Pakistan in 1996, and slowly spread to other South Asian countries, first Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and then India and Nepal, hosting some 150 Bank staff in one-week village immersions. As well as managers, the programme was also offered to Young Professionals at the Bank.¹ The idea of this was to increase their exposure to

¹ The Young Professionals Programme is 'designed to attract outstanding young and motivated individuals from around the world, who have demonstrated a commitment to development, supported by academic success, professional achievement and potential for leadership'. See www.worldbank.org.

village/urban poverty situations in developing countries and to challenge participants to ask themselves how they could utilise their skills and knowledge in the service of the poor, and contribute to reducing poverty.

The VIP was also opened-up to government officials and participants from other organisations. The first such immersion took place in Bangladesh where two government officials and one DfID (UK Department for International Development) staff member joined the programme. One of the government participants was part of a team drafting the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) for Bangladesh.² During the feedback session he said that he would go back to his office and try to 'convince his colleagues to re-write the PRSP' as, in its present form, it had little relationship with the ground reality he experienced.

Thematic immersion programmes were also introduced to keep up with the demand for better knowledge services. These included programmes focusing on micro-insurance, participatory grassroots mobilisation, and water and sanitation. They were generally aimed at better understanding the poverty impact of development policy lending and similar economy-wide operations.

One interesting point to note is how the immersion approach has been adopted by staff members in the South Asia Region. For instance, immersions have now been used throughout the region to monitor projects such as the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) (see Qazi Azmat Isa's article, Section 4) and the Karnataka (India) Rural Water Supply and Environmental Sanitation Project, for which immersion was chosen as the preferred mechanism for tracking impact on the ground. Immersions have helped Bank staff better understand and document results on the ground, especially with regard to the living conditions of beneficiary populations. Immersions are also still used in sector work and advocacy.

Lessons from the Village Immersion Programme

The programme is critical to:

- gaining first-hand understanding of the impact of, and

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- obstacles to, development at the local level; and
- recognising concerns, priorities, and solutions through the realities of the poor, rather than predominantly through the eyes of government intermediaries.

The VIP has also:

- been instrumental in convincing senior officials, both in government and in the World Bank, of the importance and value of social mobilisation;
- contributed to the evolution of the Bank's culture as a whole from an 'expert' approach to a more realistic client-focused attitude, listening to and learning from clients and increasing staff's understanding of the complexities of poverty; and
- given an increased sense of urgency to the Bank's mission of helping reduce global poverty.

The future

The South Asia Region is currently exploring options for conducting the next series of VIPs for new managers and staff. This process is still at the early stages and concerns the South Asia Region only. Plans are to start a new series of immersions over the next few months around World Bank management events in the region. This would offer the advantage of bringing large numbers of managers to South Asia.

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² Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) are prepared by World Bank member countries through a participatory process involving domestic stakeholders as well as external development partners, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.