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Host families

by **IZZY BIRCH** with contributions from **GAURIBEN, RAMILABEN, SHANTABEN, KAMLABEN, AMA GARIBA, SAM MPANGA, and SAURABH KUMAR**

The voices of those who host immersion participants are seldom heard. The visitors leave and write their reports, in an attempt to describe for a wider audience what they felt and learnt, and what the implications might be for development policy or practice. But the thoughts of their hosts rarely leave their villages.

In order to try to redress this imbalance, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and ActionAid were asked to carry out some interviews with host families to hear what they had to say.¹ The following conversation took place between SEWA staff and a group of four SEWA members:

- **GAURIBEN**, a salt worker from Bharada village in Surendranagar district and a SEWA member for 15 years;
- **RAMILABEN**, a mason from Juna Vadaj, an urban area of Ahmedabad, and a SEWA member for almost 30 years; and
- **SHANTABEN** and **KAMLABEN**, tobacco workers from Mehalav and Rasnol villages in Anand district, and each of them SEWA members for 20 years.

All four had hosted several Exposure and Dialogue Programmes (EDPs), mostly for staff from the World Bank (see Section 1).

What does EDP mean to you?

Shantaben

When I had guests, they worked with me in the tobacco field. Members from my village immediately blamed me, saying that I shouldn't have allowed them: first, they were guests, and second, this job was too dangerous and hard for them. I then explained that the organisation I am a member of organises such visits for outsiders to learn more about poor peoples' lives and struggles, as in my case. Thereafter, everyone started to respect me, even the landlord I work for. They all appreciated that I am a member of a serious and committed organisation.

Kamlaben

EDP is a good way to learn. This is how other people can get to know about the hardships of our lives.

Ramilaben

I also think it is a good learning experience, although not always easy. I still remember one of my guests struggling

¹ A membership organisation of self-employed women, based in India, and one of the foremost organisations hosting immersions – see Section 1.

with broom and dust. He wanted to help me clean the house but the dust was coming back inside instead!

What were you expecting in your first EDP? Were your expectations met? And how do you feel now?

Gauriben

The first time I was worried. I thought, how am I going to manage for their food? I was also anxious about having foreign visitors in my house. But since SEWA facilitators were there to support me, I felt more relaxed and everything went well. Apart from this, I don't have expectations of any other kind, least of all financial!

Shantaben

I was eager to know more about agricultural practices and crops in other countries.

Kamlaben

I wanted to learn about women's lives abroad, but what I discovered is not applicable to my case.

All

Our expectations were met: not only did we manage to satisfy our curiosities, but we also won respect in our villages. We are still eager to learn more as new guests may come from other countries. Our initial fear is over.

Do you have space to learn yourself during an EDP?

Kamlaben

Our learning is somehow limited by the language and the fact that during the day we are too busy to talk. However, at night we can sit together and stay until late. I usually ask my guests about women and their life conditions abroad.

Shantaben

I've discovered more about the Netherlands, of which I was gifted a map from one of my guests.

Kamlaben

Our guests also keep informing us about their lives by writing us letters. I've recently got a wedding card, for example.

Shantaben

I rear cattle, and once my guest and I discussed milk products and how to produce butter and cheese. Another thing

I learnt from my guests is the importance of technology; now I am encouraging my son to study the computer. I find conversations of this kind very interesting, but not all suggestions are feasible in my case.

Ramilaben

My guest and I once discussed the legal status of masons in her country. Of course, our context here is different. Nonetheless, this made me more aware of my rights.

Shantaben

There needs to be more time. Even at night when we have more time to chat with our guests, the whole community is there because they are equally curious. So we never have chance for one-to-one dialogue with our guests.

Kamlaben

I would suggest having two days in which guests share our daily work, and leave only one day for talking at home. There are other phases of the EDP (reflection and dialogue) for interaction with our guests, but these are all group activities. So it is not the same for us. We wouldn't mind losing one day of work as it would be like having training; we don't work but we learn in exchange.

What do you like most in an EDP and what would you like to change, apart from having more time?

All

We are impressed by the fact that strangers may be interested in our lives, and in order to learn more about us they do exactly what we do. They really experience our hard work first hand, and this is the most immediate and effective way to learn about our lives. But we worry about their discomfort.

Shantaben

Some of our jobs are too dangerous and tough for our guests. In such cases they should just observe. Working in the tobacco fields you inhale a lot of dust and nicotine. Once my husband blamed me because I had let my guests work with me and they might have fallen sick. Afraid, I immediately gave them butter milk to prevent any disease. Maybe some form of prevention might be taken, such as wearing masks while in the tobacco fields or gloves when mixing cement. Sometimes, guests' hands are so painful that they can't even help me in cooking!

Ramilaben

I am also worried every time my guests work with me in the construction of buildings. They may fall and get hurt, and there is no insurance for it.

Kamlaben

Where I live, waterlogging is a problem. This made walking so hard for my guest that she had joint pain all day afterwards.

What is the strangest thing you have heard from your guests?

Kamlaben

One of my guests once told me that she had never worked under the sun before.

Shantaben

I had a guest from the USA who was 40 and still not married. She had travelled all the way from the USA to India to take part in the EDP. If I were her mother, I'd never let her go!

Would you like to undergo an immersion yourself?

All

We would definitely like to be guests ourselves, once. If we could choose, we would like to stay with poor people of other countries as well as our previous guests.

Shantaben

Once I went to Bangladesh because of some SEWA meetings and visited some rural villages. There I've learnt that some families are so desperate and exploited by money lenders that they may be forced to sell their daughters. This shocking discovery made me see my village situation in a different light.

Do you have any suggestions for our readers?

Kamlaben

Experiences like EDPs are effective ways of learning and so more organisations should promote and undergo them.

Gauriben

Facilitators and translators should belong to the grassroots organisations hosting these exposures. Otherwise the host-guest dialogue may be mistranslated or altered.

Shantaben

It would be a good idea to have in-country EDPs too. I mean Indians meeting other Indians. Being within the same country, the exchange of experience may be more useful and applicable to local contexts. For instance, I visited Madhya Pradesh and it turned out to be very informative for me.

Gauriben

Getting people together is crucial when you want to 'build' something. It is like clapping. You can only do it by using both hands!

Ama Gariba's reflections

Ama Gariba hosted one of the participants in an ActionAid-facilitated immersion in Funsu, Ghana, in June 2005 (see Section 3). She talked with Kweku Koranteng, programme manager for ActionAid's Upper West Regional Development Programme, about what she thought of the experience.

The immersion gave me an opportunity to learn new things. I remember particularly those things about the upkeep of children and women's way of life which appeared to be a major concern for my guest. She discussed with me issues about my parents, sisters, and brothers. She advised me on the need to be patient, as a group leader, in the management of issues concerning our group, my siblings, and my husband. She gave me a feeling that the common things we face as women are similar or even worse elsewhere. These talks gave me hope and made me feel that I am not alone. Somehow I trusted her and took her advice very seriously and, believe me, this patience has yielded great personal dividends.

For example, I was able to hold our struggling group together in spite of the many difficulties which were threatening to break us up, because I was prepared for this happening after talking to my guest. The result was the selection of our group as the Regional Best Soyabean Production Group on the occasion of the Regional Farmers' Day Award of 2006. Women here are the same as those elsewhere, but being conscious of what may be coming in such a group situation and being prepared is something the others probably have not experienced.

My biggest disappointment about the immersion was that you did not bring another batch to Funsu in subsequent years. As married women we scarcely get the opportunity to interact with people beyond our family on general matters for that length of time, let alone

people from outside our country. We were getting more confident about the programme and looking forward to more of these kinds of opportunities presented in the way the immersion was done. For us, when somebody genuinely subjects herself to sharing your life in the way my guest did, you feel humbled and challenged to give of your best, as well as motivated to learn from her experiences.

I think you must allow us to write directly to our guest for advice and to share some of the good things that they have helped us achieve. We would not all be disturbing them with silly requests as you fear. Tell my guest I am very grateful that she came and look forward to seeing her once again.

Sam Mpanga's reflections

Sam Mpanga, who hosted a visitor during an ActionAid-facilitated immersion in Uganda, commented:

We did not know exactly how it would turn out, but it turned out well. Equating immersions to 'hosting a visitor' made the idea simple and easy for us to understand. We prepared to receive our visitor knowing very well that in the African context a visitor is only a visitor for one night, and the following day is expected to blend in the family and share in the duties.

We learnt a lot from the visitors. I had the opportunity to ask my visitor any question that came to my mind, especially business questions, since this turned out to be our common area of interest. The visitors quickly seemed like part of us. They adjusted to our lifestyle, understood the challenges that surround us, and were interested in knowing more about us. Before, we were suspicious that these people were coming to spy on us or laugh at us. We could not imagine that they simply wanted to learn from us.

The relationship between host and visitor can be enormously positive, as these extracts suggest. However, the environment within which these encounters take place can be far from superficial or cosy. The normal under-currents of tension and conflict that characterise every society may well surface; visitors and their interpreters must be prepared to deal with and try to understand them.

Saurabh Kumar's reflections

Saurabh Kumar, who acted as interpreter/facilitator for an ActionAid immersion in Mandsaur district, Madhya Pradesh, writes of a host village where the sex trade was the main means of livelihood and prostitution rampant.

There are some experiences which leave a lasting impact on our lives. This immersion programme was designed to provide first-hand experience of the sufferings and struggles of the Bachra community. They are stigmatised as traditional prostitutes, though I later learnt that they were forced into the world's oldest profession only a few generations back.

The conditions prevailing in the village were evident as soon as we stepped inside. We were offered young girls between 10 and 20 years of age by pimps, and were hurled with abuse when we declined. When we tried to talk with a young prostitute, her parents abused our host for bringing such nuisances into the village. Parents force their daughters into the sex trade in order to meet day-to-day expenses and the dowry for their sons' weddings. Although I am a rural development professional, I learnt about a different dimension of poverty here. Others suffer hunger and poverty, but the Bachra girls suffer humiliation and disgrace leading to their social stigmatisation. They cried before us narrating their tales, while their concerned parents waited outside and abused us.

On the second day of our stay we encountered a policeman who came to the village in order to extract bribes from the customers who frequented it. On seeing unknown faces he rushed towards us and started enquiring about the purpose of our visit. He started abusing us and even showed us the cane he was carrying. Many people assembled around us: those who were against the sex trade spoke in our favour, while those who had pushed their daughters into the trade chose not to recognise us, even though they had spent most of their time with us over the previous two days. When the policeman found out that we were from ActionAid and not scared of him he changed his tone. But in order to create an impression on the villagers he instructed us to report at the police station the following morning. We did, and reported him, and he was thereafter instructed not to enter the village again.

An anonymous reflection

Another example comes from an immersion in Africa, where one of the visitors witnessed the reality of gender violence. It also illustrates the dilemmas that can face outsiders in deciding whether or not to intervene:

On the last evening of our stay, my interpreter and I were walking through the village when an elderly woman called out to us from over a compound wall. Inside the compound we found a young woman, crouching down beside the wall

of a house, hiding so that she could not be seen by any passers by.

She had sought refuge in the home of this elderly relative because she was being hunted by a man who wanted to marry her, and was visiting all the houses with a group of male kinsmen. The girl explained that she had been working in the town for some time and had recently returned to the village to see her family. One day she had gone to visit a married sister in another village and was there kidnapped by a young man whom she had not previously known, and who held her captive in his compound. As is the custom, he refused to release her until her parents sent for her.

The parents first sent her brother, but the kidnapper would not let her go. Only when the mother went did he release her to go home. The next day he and his relatives came to her home village bringing gifts and cash to make an offer of marriage to the girl's father, who accepted. Distraught, the girl ran away to hide on the other side of the village. She said that she did not want to marry, and was planning to study sewing in the town so that she could earn her own living. She was waiting for a few days to pass in the

hope that the men would go away and she could then sneak onto a bus or lorry passing in the night and leave the village. Her worry was that if she were seen trying to escape, they would drag her off the bus.

It occurred to me that as we were leaving the next day, we could pick her up in one of our vehicles directly from the compound where she was hiding and take her with us to the town. My interpreter, shocked by the story, initially thought this a good idea, but on further reflection pointed out that were we to do this, then the local partner organisation which had arranged the immersion could be blamed by the community for interfering with a parental decision. There seemed no time or space for us to meet collectively to discuss this. So, we didn't help and I do not know whether she managed to get away or was violently forced into a marriage against her will – something which I understand has now been made illegal in this country.

In these kinds of situations the immersion facilitator or interpreter can use their local knowledge to help decide the best course of action. Their role as intermediary between host and visitor is discussed in the next sections.

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