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Not your usual facilitator...

by DEE JUPP

Some immersions use no facilitator. This is particularly the case when they are an integral part of programme development or monitoring (see Haider Yacub/Saiful Islam and Qazi Asmat Isa, Section 4), or when they are self-organised (John Samuel, Section 3). Or a facilitator is needed to help bridge the worlds of the hosts and the visitors – in Karl Osner's words, to help 'smooth the communication' between the two.

Sometimes the facilitator also acts as interpreter; this practice is followed by SEWA. Another approach, used by ActionAid, gives the facilitator a role that is distinct from that of the interpreters. S/he provides practical and emotional support to the visitors, working with individuals to reflect on their experiences and draw out its implications.

DEE JUPP explores this particular form of facilitation in the following article. She compares participatory approaches facilitators, whose work with groups to enable intra-group engagement requires them to adopt particular attitudes and behaviours, and immersion facilitators, who work with immersion participants to help those participants adopt appropriate attitudes and behaviours for a quality immersion experience.

Not your usual facilitator...

Immersions aim to provide an individual with an experience of poverty by sharing the day-to-day life of a host family. ActionAid promotes the concept of 'facilitated immersions' where a facilitator provides practical and emotional support to immersion participants. This is quite different from a participatory approaches (PA) facilitator. But yet, when ActionAid in 2006 asked more than eight countries for candidates to train as facilitators to support immersions, all those put forward had excellent PA facilitation backgrounds but were not necessarily what was required to support immersions. All facilitators of immersions should be PA facilitators – but not all PA facilitators can be facilitators of immersions!

We deliberated at length to find a better term than 'facilitator' to describe the role we envisaged. 'Mentor', 'counselor', 'guide', 'adviser', 'motivator' were among many (sometimes quite exotic!) terms we toyed with, but all had particular connotations with which we were not entirely comfortable. A facilitator for immersions is all of these and more. We finally settled on 'immersion facilitator' in order to make the very important distinction from a PA facilitator.

So what is the difference? And why does it matter?

The difference stems essentially from the fundamental differ-

ences between participatory approaches and immersions. Some of these are discussed below in the context of the different facilitator roles required.

Purpose

Generally, participatory approaches are used with the intention of reaching a result; a village plan, a self evaluation, a joint analysis and problem solving, consensus, transfer of knowledge or technology. The PA facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding, and cultivates shared responsibility towards this end.

The quality of the outcome is due in part to the quality of the facilitation process. By contrast, immersions are experiential in nature and outcomes are personal, specific to individuals undergoing the immersion and, often, less tangible. Unlike other participatory approaches, they are driven by the individual's own agenda, not by the shared agenda of a group. The immersion facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the immersion experience results in learning and enhanced understanding of poverty for each immersion participant, by helping them understand the immersion concept, 'let go' of their professional roles and biases, and live as far as possible the life of their hosts. The purpose is to help the immersion participant see things differently. There is no obligation to take subsequent action together with others.

The purpose and, to some extent, the process of participatory approaches can usually be defined in advance (in a schedule or process/workshop flow diagram). The immersion process and outcome, on the other hand, is unpredictable. In fact, the immersion facilitator actively encourages the immersion participant to be open to the unexpected. What an immersion participant feels and thinks after an immersion may be very different from what they expected before it!

Process

PA facilitators use a range of techniques to tease out participants' different perspectives. The skilled PA facilitator uses visual and other interactive methods to enable participation – even where there are divergent views and differences in power. An immersion is all about the experience of the individual undergoing the immersion. The immersion facilitator does not facilitate group processes (except in the pre-briefing and post-immersion reflection) but rather works one-on-one with immersion participants to help them achieve their personal objectives.

In participatory approaches, emphasis is usually placed on triangulation, which is essential in managing diverse perspectives and multiple sources of information. The objective of an

immersion is not to uncover facts or to get a full picture of a situation, but rather to 'go with the flow' and learn as the experience unfolds. Immersion participants are essentially experiencing the life of one family at one point in time. It is not, in any way, representative.

Status, identity, and attitudes

In participatory approaches, the PA facilitator recognises the unequal status of stakeholders and uses their skills to manage this. At best they will enable some kind of equalising dynamic, but there is no intention to change the status and identity of individuals. By contrast, the immersion deliberately intends to play down the status of immersion participants, enabling them to live, as far as possible, as their hosts live. This includes not assuming guest or preferential status, joining in household tasks, dressing simply, eating and drinking with the family, not using resources which confer status (mobile phones, radios, cameras, sunglasses), walking rather than driving, and not being choosy about activities, facilities, or food.

Empathy

Although respect and a non-judgmental style are essential to facilitating participatory approaches, the PA facilitator is not obliged to feel empathy with participants or encourage them to empathise with each other. While some PRA practitioners try out new tasks (e.g. winnowing, collecting water, weaving, roof mending, farming) this is generally a means to build rapport, 'break the ice', and bring people closer together. Since 'putting a face to poverty' is at the heart of immersions, immersion participants take part in household and community activities wholeheartedly as a way to experience and understand other people's lives. Through this more intensive and less tokenistic engagement, participants discover for themselves how heavy the water is to carry, how back-breaking the weeding is, and how difficult it is to bathe in the river.

Emotions

In my experience, in several countries with a range of participants from field-level workers to government ministers, it is not an exaggeration to say that immersions may be transformational. Immersion participants may question their long-held beliefs about development, feel inadequate, overwhelmed, and challenged by stepping out of their comfort zones. Throughout the immersion, the immersion facilitator is on hand (but not intrusively) to support immersion participants by listening to their concerns, insights, and reflections, and providing advice or linking them with their peers for support, ever-mindful that an immersion experience

Table 1: Roles, knowledge, and skills of PA and immersion facilitators

Participatory Approaches facilitator	Immersion facilitator
Works with groups and is concerned with managing group dynamics.	Primary concern is the immersion participant and the relationships they build with the host family, interpreter, fellow participants, and host community.
Has expert knowledge and skills in a variety of participatory approaches, which they use to maximise participation and interaction in groups.	Has knowledge and skills in participatory approaches to pass on to immersion participants as alternative ways to engage in conversations with their hosts. Uses these approaches in briefing and de-briefing session with immersion participants.
May use games, icebreakers, rapport-building techniques to create a fun environment for openness and trust as well as to reduce power distance in groups working together.	Encourages the immersion participant to integrate as much as possible in the life of the host household and community, albeit for a short time. Activities are engaged in seriously. Must have experienced an immersion themselves at some point.
Need not have broad understanding of development work. Some tailoring of approaches to stakeholder mix is required, but the facilitator does not need to have had exposure to the different organisational and national cultures represented in the group. Facilitation skills and managing group dynamics are paramount. Remaining 'content neutral' is usually key to good facilitation.	In order to understand the context of an immersion and to provide meaningful mentoring for development professionals undergoing an immersion experience, the facilitator must have a broad understanding of development. May have to challenge professional biases. Should have experience of working with people from government, aid agencies, NGOs, and a good appreciation of different organisational cultures as well as participants' own cultural backgrounds.
Excellent communication and interpersonal skills.	Excellent communication and interpersonal skills but also the ability to relate to immersion participants as mentor, counsellor, friend, motivator, and supporter.

can have a profound emotional impact and can be physically challenging.

While both types of facilitator may share the same orientation to poverty and development, and may emphasise the importance of participatory approaches in embracing multiple realities, respecting everyone and promoting small voices, the role they play and concomitant profile is quite different (Table 1).

One cannot assume that a PA facilitator has the right background to be an immersion facilitator. For example, they may:

- 'push' accepted participatory approaches (e.g. promoting the use of PRA by the participant);
- under-value the importance of the participant immersing wholeheartedly in the household;
- not understand the special power dynamics of the partici-

pant/host relationship;

- favour group experience sharing over individual reflection and personal learning (particularly in introduction and post-immersion reflection sessions); and,
- as many (rightly) rely on energisers and games to motivate groups, may use fun and humour inappropriately in interactions with the participant, hosts, and host communities.

An immersion facilitator is required to ensure that immersions are valuable learning experiences for immersion participants. The prime role of PA facilitators is to enable interaction and participation of all in productive engagement. Our experience indicates that immersion facilitators are best selected from counselling/mentoring backgrounds rather than training/facilitation backgrounds.

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