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# Reflections on an immersion: Fungsi, Ghana

by ROSALIND EYBEN

**In this second account of an ActionAid-organised immersion in Fungsi, the author discusses the powerful undercurrents of race and perception that her immersion brought to light. At the end she questions whether immersions are the best way to bring the voices and perspectives of poor people to the table.**

When I have previously stayed in villages, I have never spent 3 or 4 days almost entirely in the company of the same family. I have always been there to do something, to collect information. The immersion was extraordinarily demanding; while in Fungsi I thought and felt nothing but that experience of being there.

Some of my learning from Fungsi was not a surprise when you put it down on paper: the time and respect people give to each other in greetings and conversation; the risks they take in farming and trading; the sheer hardness of the daily grind. But the immersion convinced me that spending time actually there in the village reinforces and reinvigorates existing knowledge and similar prior experiences. Someone said that it serves as a touchstone, and I felt this immediately after my return from Ghana on being plunged into an institute-wide annual review of our programmes. In all the presenta-

tions and discussions, I found myself asking how this review connected with the lives of my hosts. I noted to myself that one or two of my contributions to the discussion were because of that touchstone – points that otherwise I would not have made.

On our last morning in Fungsi, the organisers of the immersion facilitated a meeting of the host families to discuss how they had experienced our visit. Clearly much was not said because the discussion was in our presence. But while there seemed a genuine appreciation of our having come, because we had now learnt and experienced the suffering that our hosts regularly endured, there was also a worrying expectation that our visit would bring about some kind of material improvement in the lives of the community. At a ceremony on our departure, the acting Chief made this clear in his speech when he looked back on the role of white men in Fungsi – from the colonial officer building the road some 60 years ago to the Mission establishing health and educational services. Now a new group of white people had come to Fungsi to ‘take care of them’.

In our post-immersion reflection we discovered that nearly all our host families had discussed with us the theme of race. That we had all participated in their daily lives, working alongside them, only helped to reinforce the widely

**Ghana immersion  
reflections with  
Koy Thompson and  
Rosalind Eyben.**



Photo: Koy Thompson

held view that white people were good and their own black rulers bad. One child asked one of the black visitors why he was not white because he behaved like a white person. Telling them about Kofi Annan did not seem enough to prick their deep lack of self-esteem about themselves and their country.

According to a policy briefing that I helped draft, the aim of immersions is to provide 'the personal contact [that] ensures that poor people's voices and perspectives are heard and integrated into new policy approaches and practice at senior level' (Eyben, 2004). But should staff from donor agencies be playing that role? On the other hand, if donors are now busy being influential, should they not on occasions at

least get in touch with the reality of the lives of the people they seek to help?

The idea of an immersion neatly encapsulates the paradox of aid. If we want the quality of that relationship to change, then we must be careful how we design an immersion as a learning event that goes to the heart of the problem rather than evades it. In a country such as Ghana, this might mean encouraging donor staff to undertake such a programme only if they can do so in the company of senior government officials, and that the pre- and post-immersion workshops be structured to provide the opportunity to discuss what are usually the unsayables about power, self-perception, and voice in the relationship.

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