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# Personal reflection on Funsii immersion: ActionAid Ghana

by TAAKA AWORI

**The author of this reflection was the Country Director of ActionAid Ghana at the time of her immersion in Funsii, Ghana. She vividly conveys the power of experiential learning, particularly in challenging the underlying values and approaches of development practice. She also reflects on some of the issues that may face a person taking part in an immersion in their home country, or the country where they work.**

## Before the immersion

The purpose of an immersion is... well, I am not entirely sure how to describe the purpose of an immersion, but I see it is an opportunity to learn through direct experience about the reality of people living in poverty. The day before we got to Funsii, we had a pre-immersion reflection where we talked about our expectations. As is customary for me, I had a billion-and-one expectations, which included:

- I wanted to understand how power is conceptualised in the community;
- I wanted to understand the conceptual framework for change in the community and what change they wanted to see in their lives;
- I wanted the people living in poverty to become so real to

me that I stop seeing them as an abstract group that I often romanticise;

- I wanted to confront my prejudices about people living in poverty; and finally
- I wanted the whole experience to leave a footprint on my soul (as you can see I aim high...why not, I thought?).

After some group discussion, it became apparent to me that many of my expectations were unrealistic. I mean seriously, how did I expect to understand how the community conceptualises power and 'change' in 3 days? I am not even sure how I conceptualise power or change and I live with me. I was beginning to learn what can and cannot be achieved in an immersion. So I let go of my expectations about getting an understanding, which was fine by me because I wanted to get away from the usual development analysis of people and situations. I opted to let go and determine that when in the community I would simply observe, experience, listen, and simply be... I would then see what learning would arise.

## During the immersion

I lived with an older man, his three wives, and various children. In the daytime I worked with my host mother and her co-wife to make shea butter, I went to the farm to sow

**Ama Gariba, flanked by senior members of the Women's Soyabean Group which she leads, during a discussion with the ActionAid programme co-ordinator about the impact of the immersion in Funsu.**



Photo: Kweku Koranteng

**Taaka (left of picture) being taught by her host how roasted shea nuts are ground into the paste from which shea butter is extracted.**



Photo: Kweku Koranteng

groundnuts, I drank *pitto* (the local alcoholic brew), and I ate many tasty meals of TZ (the local dish). In the evenings I lay on a mat with my interpreter under the bright stars, while my host mother told us mystical Funsu tales of courage and cunning. At night I lay under the mosquito net, in my narrow camp bed, in an empty room next to my host father's room.

As is customary in Africa, I was treated like an honorary guest and thus never fully felt the hard edge of poverty that one associates with rural communities. During the 3 days, to my surprise, poverty and its attendant hardships tickled my consciousness at the fringes but never came and took a front seat. I saw it, could feel it, could smell and could hear it, but only in the shadows, in the background. I never talked about it. Instead what was upfront in my face was culture: the rich African culture, its complexity, its perils, but most of all its humanity. For 3 days the greetings, the family meetings, and the stories revealed a positive side of African culture that I knew existed but had forgotten.

I was thrown totally off guard. When you spend as much time as I do fighting the patriarchal dimensions of African society that as a woman threaten to strangle you and your sisters' development, you forget. When you spend so much time listening to stories that the West has told about Africans – about our poverty, our corruption, our penchant for brutal wars and other inhuman practices – you start to believe those stories and start to tell them about yourself; you forget. You forget that Africans are not just poor people, and even when we live in dire poverty, we are more than our poverty. We

have a strong social fabric that holds us together; we have strong values about humanity and how to foster humane and thoughtful societies. Despite all the stories and horrors I had seen Africans do to each other, in Funsu I remembered that deep within us as Africans is a knowing and living that is deeply humane and at one with nature. The people I met in Funsu were not perfect, but they had a lot to teach the world about how to live with and value each other. I am still very much alive to the patriarchy and inequity that exists within African culture, but I am simply being reminded that there is more than just this.<sup>1</sup>

The other major reminder I got while in Funsu was about the relationship between Africans and the white man. One day, sitting on a mat under the stars, I asked my host mother about the changes she had seen or heard about in Funsu over the years. She talked about the roads, the schools, girls going to school, the clinic – all as positive things that had happened. Eager to understand her perception of what drives positive change, I asked what brought about these things. Her answer was simple: the white man. With those three words, my host mother reminded me very vividly of the discomfort I have always had with Africa's relationship with

<sup>1</sup> Note from the author: Please forgive me for using the term 'African culture' as if it is homogeneous. I am only too aware and respectful of the diversity within the cultures of Africa, but being a child of many of these diverse African cultures, I am also constantly surprised at the commonality and likeness between them. By using the term 'African culture', I am including myself as an object of reflection rather than simply the people of Funsu and their culture.

**“It was a very different way of learning for me because I learned experientially. In that sense, all of me was learning, not just my mind, as is usually the case.”**

the white man. We are the oppressed, the subjugated, the colonised, and recently the recipient, the debtor and/or the grantee. We are too often on the receiving end, and rarely full partners and agents in the relationship. More recently, on the global level, we are being rescued by Tony Blair and Bob Geldof. Something is entirely wrong with that picture. The difficulty is that that relationship starts to affect thinking about who should drive our development at the community, national, or global level. Do we trust each other enough as Africans to lead and be responsible for our own development? I don't have the answers to these questions, but I think as Africans we owe it to ourselves to start confronting these difficult truths.

#### **After the immersion**

During a day of reflection we pondered among many things how the experience would affect our development practice. A number of thoughts and feelings emerged within me.

#### **I need to address the poverty that is much closer to home**

During the time in Funsu I kept asking myself, why I don't get this close to people living in poverty closer to my home – those in my own village, or near my house in Accra? Did I have to go so far away to the Upper West to experience this? What I realised is that I fear I will not manage the demands of those who have much easier access to me, or who have some entitlement to me such as a distant relative. The experience in Funsu reminded me of the need to come to terms with this and stop seeing people living in poverty simply as supplicants.

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There is an important need to have an alternative model of development that nurtures how people treat and value each other

Being in Funsu reminded me so much of how underdeveloped and uncivilised so-called 'developed' countries can be, particularly in human relations. Yet in so many instances, this is the model of development that 'underdeveloped' countries are to aspire to. Even in wealthy nations, many thoughtful and caring individuals are struggling to incorporate a more spiritual, humane, simpler, and environmentally conscious model of living. Clearly, an alternative model is urgently needed where in Africa we let go of what is not working yet nurture and evolve what is.

#### **The practice of development should include working with concepts of self at the individual, community, or even regional levels**

The comment by my host mother and the issues of Africa's relationship with the West are very much about concepts of self vis-à-vis the other. These may arise in a gender situation, in a race situation, in an ethnic situation, or in any situation where there are unequal power relationships. Yet unless we acknowledge these feelings, and unless we claim our own power, then we continue to be the biggest barrier to our own development. These kinds of issues need to come more into the development discourse.

#### **Last words**

The immersion has helped me grow as development practitioner, but more importantly as a person. It was a very different way of learning for me because I learned experientially. In that sense, all of me was learning, not just my mind, as is usually the case. The immersion allowed me to stop analysing people living in poverty as objects of development, but rather just to be with them and allow the learning to emerge.

The love and acceptance of my host family to me, a total stranger, was probably the biggest gift of the three days. Therein lay my greatest lesson.