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Everyone at Sida should do an immersion!

by OLOF SANDKULL and GÖRAN SCHILL

The following account was written by two Sida staff members following their stay with a family affected by the 2004 tsunami in southern Sri Lanka. The piece shows how initial scepticism was replaced by enthusiasm for an approach that offers more than the usual 'ceremonial' project visit by foreign donors. Sida is leading the field among donors in institutionalising the practice of immersions (see Nilsson et al., Section 4). At a time when many donors are moving further and further away from having any direct contact with people living in poverty – in part a consequence of the shift towards budget support – Sida is signalling its commitment to reducing that gap.

'Everyone at Sida should do an immersion!' This was the spontaneous reaction of Göran Schill in Colombo after we had spent 3 nights with a tsunami-affected family in southern Sri Lanka. When I first approached Göran about my immersion plans, his response had been quite sceptical. He questioned whether this was really what the staff of a funding agency should be doing. He was concerned that it would turn out to be a superficial 'poverty tourism' mission in which Sida staff would again take centre-stage. These

were well-grounded concerns, based on being part of too many ceremonial project visits with too little time to interact with poor people. On the other hand, if you spend about 90% of your time in an office or in meetings with other donors, you become quite distanced from the realities around you, even if you live in the country.

The Asia-MENA (Middle East & North Africa) Department has included in its annual plan a statement that all country programme coordinators should do an immersion during 2007 in order to increase the poverty focus of their work. The idea behind doing an immersion is to gain insights into people's lives through participation and observation, and to get a crucial reality check.

Nilantha's story

The purpose of our immersion was to enhance our understanding of how poor people deal with the realities they face. We wanted to understand how people affected by the tsunami have experienced and participated in recovery activities. The immersion was organised by an NGO named FORUT (Campaign for Development and Solidarity). We spent 3 nights with fisherman Nilantha Kumara, his wife Nadeesha, and daughter Jani. They had a house on the beach that was destroyed by the tsunami and are now living

Olof Sandkull and
Göran Schill with their
hosts Nadeesha, Jani,
and Nilantha.



Photos: Chandralal De Silva, FORUT

in a new house in the Yayawetta tsunami resettlement project located a couple of kilometres inland in Hambantota District.

When the tsunami hit, Nadeesha was in the house and Jani was sleeping in her cot, which started to float. Although they were able to find safety on the roof, Nadeesha does not want to move back to the beach. Nilantha would like to, but respects his wife's trauma. It is difficult to fish when living away from the sea because Nilantha uses methods that require that him to be on immediate standby. Nilantha can be described as a self-made man with strong integrity who is ready to work hard for a better life, something that has not been so easy despite 'the second tsunami' of foreign funds pouring into Sri Lanka.

Outcomes of the immersion

During our stay we heard many stories about how tsunami recovery money had been misused or distributed to non-eligible persons. A general rule that was restated to us many times was that those who lost most received the least, and those who were unaffected had both the time and energy to grab as much as possible. By not being aware of or addressing local power structures and patron-client systems, and by not involving the target population, many of the reconstruction activities did not reach those most in need, or were not effective. It was also evident that the same forces are at play during regular development activities, and that many lessons can be learnt from this which are applicable to other countries.

Olof takes a boat trip with local fishermen.



Photos: Chandralal De Silva, FORUT

The immersion gave us first-hand experience and interaction with people living in relative poverty, and increased our understanding of their realities and coping strategies. Some of the key gains included:

- relating to poor people's realities;
- enhancing our country knowledge;
- formulating more informed questions; and
- triggering reflection.

All these insights assist in applying a rights perspective and poor people's perspective to development and, especially, the four underlying principles of participation, non-discrimination, transparency, and accountability.

Lessons learnt

We collected a few lessons that are worth sharing with others planning to do an immersion.

- First of all, it is important to be careful when choosing a local organiser, and to try to find one which is firmly based in the local culture and which adheres to bottom-up participatory approaches.
- The interpreter is a key person in the overall success of the immersion. S/he should be familiar with the community and know the area well. S/he should also be able to function as a facilitator in order to provide advice and explain the bigger picture. It is also important that their personal skills are good, to enable the interpreter to communicate and interact easily with different kinds of people. An earlier experience with anthropological work is desirable.
- Try to find out as much as possible about the local context and situation of the host family beforehand. It helps you in your interaction and also with what to bring and expect.
- Bring practical products for payment for the stay and as personal gifts.
- Write down your purpose and professional angle for the immersion as clearly as possible in order to make it easier for the organiser to understand what you want. This also lessens the risk of misinterpretation and unrealistic expectations.

Conclusion

All in all, we think that there is a lot of added value in an immersion, and therefore we recommend that all programme staff at Sida should do one. Interestingly, the family of Nilantha also found our visit worthwhile. They said this was the first time they had had a chance to interact with foreigners and learn about our country.

CONTACT DETAILS

Olof Sandkull
Country Co-ordinator
Asia department, Sida HQ
Valhallav 199
105 25 Stockholm
Sweden
Tel: +46 8 698 5202
Email: olof.sandkull@sida.se

Göran Schill
Social Adviser, Embassy of Sri Lanka
49, Buller's Lane
PO Box 1072
Colombo
Sri Lanka
Tel: +94 11 4795 400
Email: goran.schill@sida.se