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Using immersions for programme development at Plan Bangladesh

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Plan Bangladesh uses immersions throughout the project cycle – but most critically in the planning phase – to build relationships with the communities where it works. Regular ‘home stays’ deepen staff understanding of the environment in which they are intervening and reaffirm their commitment to participatory social change. In addition, all Plan staff – regardless of their role or level of responsibility – are encouraged to undergo an immersion as part of their induction and orientation.

Bangladesh is one of 66 countries where Plan works. Its operations in Bangladesh started in 1994 and it has developed programmes in the areas of education, health, environment, and livelihoods. These programmes are based on the principle that children, women, and men can lead their development process.

In order to put theory into practice, Plan developed the child-centred community development approach (CCCD). This approach hinges on:

- the facilitation of participatory processes;
- building partnerships and alliances;
- supporting groups and organisations;
- scaling up child-centred programmes; and

- working with civil society to encourage recognition of and respect for children's rights.

Plan Bangladesh uses immersions as a key work process in its child-centred community development approach (CCCD). All new Plan and partner staff in Plan's seven programme units receive thorough training on CCCD and are required to do an immersion.¹

The structure of a Plan immersion

Before starting development work in any community, Plan's staff and partners undergo an immersion process. Through this, they can meet with and understand the community, and the community gets an opportunity to understand and familiarise themselves with the organisation.

Plan staff members begin the immersion process by introducing themselves to local community leaders. As the community comes to know the staff member more intimately, they also come to understand Plan Bangladesh as an organisation with a vision and mission. Reasons for visiting the village are explained and, after a few meetings, Plan staff members gain the confidence and trust of the

¹ Each programme has, on average, six partners. Each partner has six staff members working with the programme.

Children of a village primary school spend time engaged in cultural activities during their break.



Photo: Plan Bangladesh

community. In this sense, an immersion is a process of building relationships with the communities where Plan Bangladesh intends to work. This relationship includes not just the traditional leaders, but also the larger community, especially children and other relevant groups.

Plan and its partners then seek to develop a common understanding with the community, including the following aspects:

- the community's values;
- ways people perceive their realities;
- dynamics that exist among members of the community;
- power relationships and gender roles;
- cultural practices;
- local taboos;
- children's workload and interests;
- family diet, economic status, and their effects on children's health, learning, and recreation;
- history of past interventions with the community;
- defecation and hygiene practices; and
- indigenous knowledge and practice.

'Home stay' immersions – staying in the community with a host family for a few days – are an important part of developing this understanding. There are two main aspects to a 'home stay' immersion.

- **Selection of the host family.** The host families selected reflect the characteristics of the target groups Plan aims to work with. Using participatory wealth ranking with children, the area households are categorised into five categories. The poorest of the poor cover around 7%; the largest number of host family households comes from the category above that. They are more representative of the people that we aim to work with, and we usually prefer a home stay at one of their residences. This does not mean we avoid the poorest, and some staff members prefer to have their home stay with the poorest families.
- **Duration of the stay.** Usually, the duration of a home stay is 2 to 3 days. This helps to ensure that the visitors have an opportunity to experience the complete cycle of the family's daily chores. They should have ample opportunity to observe children's, women's, and marginalised people's daily activities and routines.

During the immersion, each Plan and partner staff member behaves as a learner who wants to understand and learn from the community's discourse. Plan and partner staff members also strive to develop a deeper and meaningful relationship with the villagers. As staff of a child-centred organisation, they are especially encouraged to develop rapport with poor girls, boys, and their families so that their aspira-

Children engaged in family operated cottage industry, making goods out of cane. During the home stay, one child shows a staff member how he works.



Photo: Plan Bangladesh

tions are reflected in future development undertakings.

Under no circumstances should Plan staff judge people in the village, based on their personal standards. All understanding and learning has to be based on the contextual reality, which may be clearer after reflecting with community elders and other development partners. During a Plan immersion, staff members are oriented to maintain good humour and be respectful of elders, poor people, and children. An immersion is an excellent time for establishing contact and building rapport with the key development players of the village.

Immersion as a process

It is important to realise that an immersion does not stop at the planning phase. It is, in fact, a continuous and vital process that continues with the project cycle.

Staff members need to have an understanding of the community's problems, identify their causes, crosscheck, and compare. These include:

- land patterns;
- occupations;
- sources of income;
- people's daily routines; and
- aspirations of the community.

Figure 1: CCD Working process cycle



They also need to:

- identify potential participants and their availability in terms of time;
- learn about culture, values, and norms; and, most importantly,
- build relationships with children and their communities.

Local children and women in a new village where Plan will work are being introduced to our staff.



Photo: Plan Bangladesh

Because of this, immersions and reflection are practised throughout each project phase of re-planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. For some of these stages, a home stay may not be the most effective method of immersion. However, having immersions throughout the project cycle gives our staff a deeper understanding of the issues. It enables them to develop more appropriate strategies, implement methodologies, and build a community's capacity to take ownership of the development process.

An immersion is not a one-off event. It is a time-consuming process during which staff pay numerous visits to the community at different times and for varying lengths of time. There are home visits and continuous daily visits at the beginning, and regular/routine visits later on. However, the immersion at the planning phase of Plan's CCCD framework is the most critical. The first phase is the period in which the foundations of the community's work are laid. Therefore, using the home stay as an immersion methodology is preferred at this stage.

Immersion techniques

During the immersion process, staff members are encour-

aged to maintain a journal for capturing insights about the following community aspects:

- marginalised groups and their issues;
- children's interest and child rights issues;
- adult-child and child-child relationships, and family power dynamics;
- power dynamics at the community and household level, kinship and boundary relationships;
- general cultural practices, taboos, etc.;
- key resources available and their distribution; and
- organised groups in the area for social action, their understanding, education, and ability.

Staff members take notes, but do so in a discreet manner so that people don't feel uncomfortable and continue to talk openly. Plan staff members are trained in various immersion techniques that can help this experience to be more effective. Techniques include rapport building with communities through:

- informal conversations;
- door-to-door visits;
- discussions at tea stalls;
- focus group discussions;
- discreet note-taking;

During their immersion, Plan staff members talk with the children in the village.



Photo: Plan Bangladesh

- interacting with local elites to understand power structures;
- talking to key informants; and
- participating in different social events.

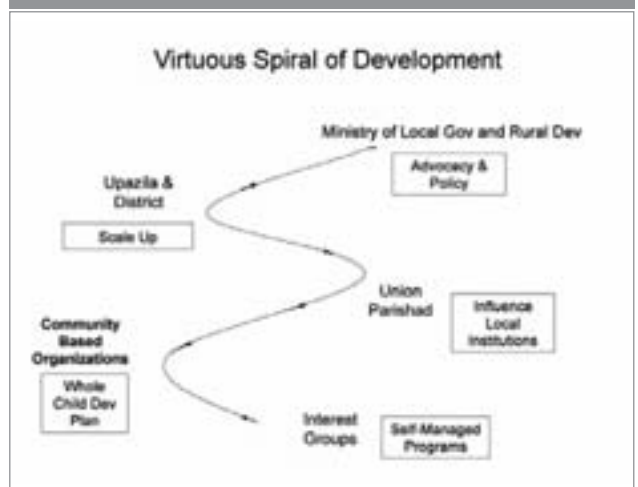
Reasons for having immersions

An immersion builds relationships between the organisation staff and the villagers. It develops mutual trust and respect. Through this process, Plan staff members gain an understanding of the community’s values, the ways people perceive their realities, and the power dynamics that exist among members of the community, before any external intervention is undertaken.

Staff members are able to observe how people work in the community or in a household. Interesting observations can be made on gender roles, who does what, how children do their homework, what chores are done by girls and boys, what kind of entertainment they have, who eats first and what is left for the last to eat, where people go for defecation, and what their hygiene habits are.

Immersion provides Plan staff members with invaluable insights about the community. This helps to develop more effective programmes, which address the practical

Figure 2: Virtuous spiral of development



and strategic needs of the target population and children. They are particularly important prior to programme planning and implementation, but are also used throughout the project cycle.

Immersion really helps to motivate and reaffirm commitment among staff members to promote social

changes, in which the participation of the marginalised population is emphasised. They also provide an opportunity to develop a profound understanding of people's perceptions about their conditions. This deeper understanding helps Plan staff to engage villagers in forming their own village organisations and provide support to the village's own development plan, in which the community aspirations are reflected and children's needs addressed.

Equally, through immersions, Plan Bangladesh creates a link between community and local development agencies so that the latter can also play a role in the implementation of the village's development plan.

Conclusion

Immersions are a vital part of Plan's work and approach. They provide staff members with a deeper understanding of development work and help them better understand their constituents. All staff, irrespective of their role and responsibility, are encouraged to undergo an immersion. As part of induction/orientation, new staff members have to undergo child-centred community development training, of which immersions are a critical component.

Regional team members and other visitors are also encouraged to do immersions during their visits to other programme countries.

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