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Immersion: the soul of development

by QAZI AZMAT ISA

The author, Qazi Azmat Isa, is the World Bank's Senior Community Development Specialist in Pakistan. Despite institutional barriers, he has made a personal decision to continue using immersions in his work, particularly to monitor and evaluate the work of the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund. The author summarises the benefits of immersions over standard monitoring and evaluation practices, but acknowledges that a more profound transformation in how the Bank conducts its business will only be achieved once a critical mass of immersion experience has been built up. Finding ways to demonstrate the impact of immersions will help make a strong case for their widespread use.

Background

The Village Immersion Programme (VIP) was a programme of experiential learning. It put World Bank staff in South Asia in the shoes of their clients by spending time with the poor of the region in their villages. Initiated in Pakistan in 1996, the programme spread to other South Asian countries, initially Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, then India and Nepal.

The VIP continued until 1999, when it was affected by

Bank-wide budget cuts. Staff retrenchment increased workloads and left little time for the VIP. It was revived in August 2001, but unfortunately, due once again to Bank reorganisation, workload, and financial pressures, the official VIP programme has become dormant.

However, I have continued to use immersions in all my work, be it project supervision, sector work, or advocacy. I am a Community Development Specialist in the World Bank, and the Task Team Leader (TTL) for the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF). A TTL leads the team that is responsible for preparing, appraising, and supervising a World Bank-funded project. Primarily, I use immersions as a supervision tool for the PPAF, and it is this I describe in this paper.

Why do it?

A mystical strain lies at the heart of all the world's great religions. Sufism is the name given to its Islamic manifestation. Sufis believe that the perennial quest for knowledge and insight leads to the Beloved (i.e. that which is being sought, or enlightenment). In our quest for insight into how to improve the lives of those we serve, there is no better way than following the immersion path. Immersion allows profound learning, for along the way one discovers the true meaning of what the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said: 'I

Zulfikar Ali and his son Arif at their new house.



Zulfikar Ali, a primary school teacher from Mankera district in Punjab.



Photos: Qazi Azmat Isa

The sorry state of village education.



am contained in the true believer's heart. If you seek me search in these hearts. Enter among my servants and thou will meet with Paradise.'

On a more mundane note, there is no better way to get first-hand knowledge about how development programmes affect people's lives than by spending time with them in the village, sharing meals, and talking into the night about their issues and priorities. The foundation of every successful business rests on knowing its clients. However, increasingly, World Bank staff are confined to government departments in capital and provincial cities, removed from the reality of poverty and from our ultimate clients – the poor of the country. Going on an immersion bridges this gap by exposing us to the reality of rural poverty.

I use immersions to supervise the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF). This project is funded by the World Bank and task managed by me. The World Bank team relies on several methods of supervision and review to monitor the project's objectives. The work of each PPAF unit is reviewed in detail by a sector specialist, and a 360-degree feedback is solicited from PPAF's partner organisations in formal roundtables. However, immersions have become the preferred mechanism for tracking its impact.

The supervision of community-based activities by World Bank missions has in the past typically focused, among other things, on rapid tours of client activities in selected places in order to obtain an overview of progress. The assumption is that visits to project sites will either confirm or deny the claims made by the statistics contained in written progress reports. Such visits are, however, usually 'stage-managed' in one form or another. Community meetings under these circumstances are, quite naturally, pre-arranged. They usually involve stylised, formal presentations in public gatherings and focus on physical achievements and project accomplishments. Supervision missions perform the role of 'policemen' or external evaluators, passing judgment on performance in a one-way flow of information. There is little

time to get beyond the particular views of informed and influential interpreters and come to terms with the particular circumstances and views of beneficiaries. There is little time to contextualise the interventions or really examine the relationships between providers and receivers. Little attention is given to the client's assessment of the performance of the implementing agency or of the Bank.

Monitoring through immersions breaks away – at least in part – from this 'traditional' relationship and from the implicit assumptions that underpin it. It provides an opportunity for mission members to get closer to their clients – the urban and rural poor.

How it's done

Mission members divide into groups and spend, on average, 2 days and nights in the homes of PPAF beneficiaries. The informal setting allows the hosts to open up and talk about issues close to their heart – how they spend their day, what challenges they face, what they hope and fear, how their life has changed after joining the programme.

Box 1: Dos and don'ts

Do

- Stay with your host for at least 24 hours, including a night stay.
- Adopt the lifestyle of the community as far as possible.
- Take pictures of the family and their home with your host's permission.
- Move around the community with your host (visit different homes, areas for recreation, prayer, education and health facilities, productive processes, etc.).
- Triangulate the information you have before you write your case study. PRA tools may be used to supplement the case studies. However, one should use a minimum number of tools and not convert the immersion into a PRA exercise.

Don't

- Display culturally inappropriate behaviour.
- Put unnecessary demands on the time of community members. Try to adapt to their timings rather than requesting them to adapt to yours.
- Make promises in response to community demands.

Table 1: Zulfikar Ali – a snapshot

	Earlier (June 2000)	Now (September 2005)
Wealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.5 acres of rain-fed land • <i>Kaccha</i> (mud) home • Bicycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12.5 acres of irrigated land • <i>Pucca</i> (brick) home • Motorcycle • Mobile phone
Education	None of his six children went to school	Barring the youngest, all go to school
Perception of causes of poverty	Landlessness	Lack of skills and facilities
Classification of households	By material possessions	By those who help others
Place of significance	Mosque	The road
Outlook	On personal well-being	On community well-being

Some guidelines and a brief questionnaire are given to all team members to help start the discussion and provide some consistency for documentation. No special privileges are afforded to the teams. They share the resources and company of their hosts for the duration of their stay. Bottled water is the only luxury they are provided with. Adequate compensation is given to host families and the facilitating partner to ensure that the immersion is not a financial constraint on them.

Before going into the field, each team is given a briefing about the village and the programme by the partner organisation. Each team writes case studies on their host. These have been instrumental in highlighting changes in the lives of the poor that are usually obscured by quantitative indicators of progress. Zulfikar Ali, a primary school teacher from Mankera district in Punjab, is a good example. A beneficiary of six loans and three veterinary trainings, Zulfikar was able to realise most of his dreams within the short span of 5 years. He now owns irrigated land, sends his children to school, and works as a vet after school hours to use his spare time productively. Yet the most significant change in his life is not the increase in his material possessions, but a higher social consciousness. Zulfikar now wants to work towards establishing a quality school as well as a vocational training centre for girls in his village (Table 1).

During the first phase of the project, supervision team members went on three immersions and documented the lives and experiences of 23 PPAF beneficiaries. Four of the hosts were revisited, three after 2 years and one after 4 years. In all follow-up visits there was visible improvement in their living conditions. A few even felt that they were 'no longer poor'! We plan to track the evolving circumstances

of a small number of families over the lifetime of the project through subsequent missions.

Challenges

The challenges that we face in using immersions include:

- The difficulty of freeing up more team time for direct interaction with clients.
- The time and effort involved in organising these visits.
- The tensions that can be created within a team if someone is not committed to the immersion.
- The need for team members returning from an immersion to incorporate what they have learned into programme policy, design, and implementation. But for this to happen, there needs to be more support for immersions, and a critical mass of experience to influence institutional processes and bring about a more profound transformation in how the Bank conducts its business.

Benefits

Immersion offers much more than just a reality check. Their benefits have included:

- **Rekindling the passion.** Almost everyone who has taken part has claimed that it has rekindled their passion and commitment to the Bank's mission, and has helped them see clearly the relevance of our principles and values. Living with the poor and getting to know first-hand their courage in the face of insecurity and vulnerability has been a source of inspiration to many team members.
- **Transcending scientific methods.** Immersions allow interactions with villagers that break down barriers. They promote exchanges that are not seen as extractive and domineering. This is especially the case at night, when

true sharing takes place, when much is revealed after a meal, sitting around a fire when the kids have been put to sleep and the animals tied. The knowledge and insight gained then is often missed by scientific methods.

- **Building partnerships.** Immersions have really helped in team building, with staff taking part from different sectors and backgrounds. Partnerships are also built between the Bank and NGOs. With increasing participation from government counterparts and other donors, these relationships could also be significantly enhanced. Immersions provide 'quality time' for the project's various stakeholders (the Bank, the government, PPAF, and partners). They can explore the problems and prospects associated with their partnership and the complex nature of the fight against poverty. They build trust by combining the personal with the professional in extended face-to-face contact.
- **Viewing the entire process.** Immersions offer an opportunity to see the impact of policies at village-level: how inclusive or exclusive they are; the political and socio-cultural barriers to inclusion; gaps and overlaps in services; and the need for partnerships and integration between sectors. Immersions break down sectoral chimneys and help staff identify holistic solutions for poverty alleviation.
- **Challenging dependent mentalities.** The dependency that characterises development assistance will be difficult to overcome. But an immersion is an opportunity to engage with clients in an analysis of the processes of impoverishment and in strategies for building more sustainable, independent, and enriched livelihoods. It also provides opportunities to explore ways in which different partners can develop their comparative advantages and mutually reinforce their separate activities.
- **Changing policy priorities.** Immersions have been instrumental in convincing senior officials, both in government and in the World Bank, of the importance and value of social mobilisation. This now forms part of Pakistan's official poverty reduction strategy. Even more importantly, the government has recently requested the Bank to fund social mobilisation and the Bank is supportive of this request – both unthinkable in the past!

Future plans

Immersion quality will be maintained and refined through regular feedback from team members, partners, and villagers. There are inherent difficulties in measuring the impact of immersions, because there is no tool to measure its value that would satisfy an economist's rigour (i.e. of attribution and causality). However, this must be attempted in order to build a case for the importance of immersions and identify changes that have taken place as a result. An element of self-evaluation will be included in future, and simple tools to capture impact will also be developed. In light of the strong interest in the immersion process shown by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Professor Robert Chambers, we aim to collaborate with them to explore this partnership further and to develop jointly the intellectual underpinning for immersion.

Keep doing it!

I made a commitment to myself when I joined the Bank that I would always keep close to the reality of those I serve, choosing the path of immersion. This path, I believe, is the path of *ishq*, of profound love and negation: negation of the self, the ego, of colour, caste, creed, and religion. It is through negation that one can achieve union with the greater Reality, and reconnect the individual soul to its original abode. The great Sufi poet, Baba Bulleh Shah, explains this negation most beautifully in his poem titled 'O Bulleh, I wonder who I am', and yearns to 'travel to a place where all are blind so that no one knows him by his caste or creed, only the quality of his heart'. For Sufis, diversity and distinction are only illusions; they see the tangible and intangible as one reality. To reach this stage, indefatigable efforts are required to negate and nullify the ego. This can be done through ascetic practices, but the shortest route is *ishq*. When *ishq* stings the soul, the mundane transforms into the exceptional, the transient into the everlasting, and the whole universe becomes a mere reflection of the face of the Beloved. Stung by *ishq*, development professionals can transform themselves into modern-day Sufis, staying closer to the Beloved as they regularly traverse the path of immersion.

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