

27

Taking onboard immersions within Sida

by ESSE NILSSON, OLOF SANDKULL, and MOLLY SUNDBERG

This article describes how the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) understand immersions, and the progress of adoption of immersions in the organisation. Some staff members remain sceptical about the purpose of immersions and whether they can add any value to work within a funding agency such as Sida. However, general scepticism is progressively turning into cautious interest, as more staff members undertake immersions, and senior management encourage them to do so.

Sida's understanding of immersions

An organisational statement entitled 'Sida's View on Immersions' defines an immersion as follows:

The philosophy behind immersion is about gaining insights into people's lives through participation and observation; in other words, to take an active role in the lives of the people one aims to assist and to do this on their terms. In practice, this means visiting a local community in a partner country while participating in their daily routines. The underlying idea is that a thorough and holistic understanding of another

person's life situation and perspectives requires oneself to practically engage in that person's daily life. An immersion thus entails a structured exercise in experiential learning as a means to better relate to people both emotionally and intellectually...

... In sum, conducting an immersion is one way to obtain a reality check thereby assisting us in our day-to-day work, and to establish contacts with the micro level to supplement and strengthen the work carried out at the macro level. It is a way to better understand and reflect on the real life impact that policies are intended to have.

The kind of reflection that an immersion evokes serves to also equip the Sida colleague with the means to use their own insights and experiences in contribution management and dialogue with partners (donor group and national actors). Own witness statements can often work to build up credibility and convincing ideas, communication and arguments. This kind of first-hand experience can also enable staff to see how multi-dimensional poverty really is, how all 'mainstreaming issues' fit together (or not), and thus ultimately lead to a sharpened and more coherent poverty focus.

Conducting immersions is consistent with the main policy documents guiding Swedish development co-operation. Since 2003, all work is directed by the Policy for Global Development (PGD). One key component of the PGD is that co-operation should take its point of departure from poor people's rights and their perspectives on development. Sida's former Director General argues that undertaking immersions is one way in which Sida staff can pursue this task: taking the opportunity to leave their office routines and instead share the everyday experiences of people living in poverty.

Progress on adopting immersions in Sida

Several staff members at Sida have undertaken immersions.

Göran Holmqvist, former Head of the Africa Regional Department and now acting Director General, has done two immersions. In February 2006 he went to Nicaragua and stayed in a remote village for 6 days. Three months later, he spent 3 days in a local farmer's house in Niassa province in Mozambique as part of his induction as the new head of the department. Holmqvist concluded that his experience had offered what he had hoped for most – an alternative way of learning, through emotional exposure rather than conventional intellect. As he himself put it, the immersion gave him that 'gut feeling' of the life and perspectives of the people he lived with.

In October 2006, the Head of the Policy and Methodology Department, **Staffan Herrström**, visited a family in rural Moldova for 4 days. Struck by the poor and harsh conditions his host family lived in, he was overwhelmed by the great generosity and hospitality they nevertheless showed him and the interesting conversations they had together. Herrström emphasised that the most valuable thing for him was having the time to sit down and discuss with his host family things that mattered to them.

'Everyone at Sida should do an immersion!' These are the words of **Göran Schill**, a Sida staff member at the Embassy of Sweden in Colombo, Sri Lanka, who together with **Olof Sandkull** from the Asia Department spent 3 nights in March 2007 in a village close to Hambantota. He was initially quite sceptical about the idea of immersions, but living with a family affected by the tsunami really made him change his mind.

Shortly after, another member of the same department, **Ulrika Lång**, went on an immersion to a rural village in Indonesia. Upon her return, Lång said that she had been surprised by the vulnerability of the family members due to their poor living conditions, and by the importance of

complex social networks to the survival of all community members. She also realised the important role that local traditional religion plays in the everyday lives of the village members, compared with the influence of Islam.

'Mini-immersions' were organised in April 2006 as part of the preparations for the new 5-year country strategy for Bangladesh. These were shorter and lighter than immersions usually are: the group spent 1 night in a village, but stayed in an NGO guest house rather than with families. Nevertheless, this still provided insights which were deeper than those gained during standard field visits. It gave the senior managers from Stockholm who took part the chance to talk with ordinary people in small groups, to get a better understanding of their realities, and to triangulate the information they were receiving from official sources such as clinics and schools.

These mini-immersions were an eye-opener for the participants and were very much appreciated by Sida staff. They triggered discussions about the reasons behind the failure of development programmes to reach the poor. The experiences gained from the immersions made a crucial impact on the direction of the forthcoming country strategy, steering it towards a sharpened poverty focus and a commitment to participatory research (Reality Checks) as a means of gaining insights into the perspectives of people living in poverty.

Sida in Bangladesh has now built on the above by starting a programme of Reality Checks to ensure that dialogue from below informs the country strategy on a long-term basis. Reality Checks combine immersions with more conventional participatory approaches (see Jupp *et al.*, this section).

In recent months there have been three more immersions. **Anna Springfors** spent 4 nights in a slum in Estelí, Nicaragua. **Helena Thorfinn** visited a village in Bangladesh for 1 week close to Barisal (within the same village as the Reality Check, although carried out independently of that). **Britta Nordström** also visited a village in Bangladesh for 1 week, not far from Saturia. The positive impact of immersions is illustrated by a report written by Britta, who wrote that:

Having done this I can now sit at the same table as high-level officials from the World Bank and look them in the eye and convincingly argue for our point of view.

Taking forward immersions in Stockholm

At Sida's headquarters in Stockholm, other staff members have been introduced to the topic of immersions and encouraged to try them out.

In January 2007 a workshop on immersions was organised by the Social Development Adviser **Esse Nilsson** from Sida's Policy and Methodology Department. The special guest was Robert Chambers. He talked about his many years of experience of participatory learning within development work. During the workshop, immersion experiences were shared and issues raised relating to practicalities, ethics, added value, and how to internalise one's experiences from the field.

Another workshop on immersions took place in May 2005 with representatives from ActionAid International (Sweden, the UK, and Ghana). The workshop particularly targeted members of the Asia-MENA Department at Sida. Their annual plan for 2007 stipulated that all Country Programme Coordinators should do an immersion. The same commitment will be extended into 2008. Anthropologists from Gothenburg University were invited to share their experiences of field work. They gave practical advice and made connections for future co-operation in the field with Sida staff members interested in or planning immersions. Meanwhile, the Department for Infrastructure and Economic Cooperation has also expressed an interest in knowing more about immersions and how to conduct them.

An information pack on practical issues concerning immersions has been put together and distributed to Sida departments and embassies in partner countries. The pack contains the Sida statement 'Sida's View on Immersions' (2007), as well as a statement by the former Director General at Sida, **Maria Norrfalk**. She expressed her support for staff members undertaking immersions, saying:

We would like to encourage this. We believe that this can enhance our understanding of the social realities where aid work is carried out and further contribute to our understanding of poor people's perspectives on development.

So far, seven articles have been published on Sida's intranet about different staff members' experiences of immersions. One discusses the meaning of immersions

"Slowly, people are becoming more convinced: initial scepticism is declining, and interest in conducting immersions is on the increase both at Sida headquarters and at the embassies."

and makes the case for their use. The other six were written by staff taking part in immersions in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Moldova.

All these articles and workshops and the staff members participating in planning and carrying out immersions have helped to trigger debate and raise staff awareness of the added value of immersions. We know that some colleagues have questions – often unspoken – about immersions: about their relevance, the time required, the risks of 'development tourism', and the possible threats to their personal safety and comfort. We also know that until they can really see their potential benefits, it will be hard to overcome these barriers. Our approach is therefore to inspire by example: to encourage more people to do them and to publish their experiences on the intranet, and in so doing motivate others to try.

Slowly, people are becoming more convinced: initial scepticism is declining, and interest in conducting immersions is on the increase both at Sida headquarters and at the embassies. More recently, other countries have expressed interest in the Reality Check approach in Bangladesh. There is still a long way to go before immersions are truly institutionalised within Sida as common practice, but we have made progress – we have helped colleagues appreciate why immersions are important. Now we need to help them understand how to put them into practice. As Maria Norrfalk, former Director General, said,

There are no right or wrong ways. Instead an immersion is a method which demands your own creativity.

CONTACT DETAILS

Esse Nilsson
Policy Adviser, Policy and Methodology
Department
Tel: +46 8 698 5300
Email: esse.nilsson@sida.se
Olof Sandkull
Country Coordinator, Asia Department
Tel: +46 8 698 5205
Email: olof.sandkull@sida.se

Molly Sundberg
Placement Student, Policy and Methodology
Department
Tel: +46 8 698 4581
Email: molly.sundberg@sida.se
Swedish International Development Agency
(Sida)
Sida HQ, Valhallav. 199
105 25 Stockholm
Sweden