

30

With the strength of the powerless: using immersions for processes of structural change

by KARL OSNER

This article provides an insight into the role that immersions played in the pro-poor reform of the German aid system. This is a concrete example of how immersion can contribute to processes of structural change or 'reform from within' as Osner defines it. Nonetheless, it is highlighted that immersions alone cannot produce such change. Sustained effort, a multitude of cooperating actors, technical competence, and strong government backing are also required. Osner concludes by delineating possible ways forward for immersions to contribute to the shaping of a New Aid Agenda.

Introduction

This article highlights the role that 'immersions' – the direct encounter between key decision makers and poor people – played in the pro-poor reform of the German aid system. This includes the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (the BMZ) as well as its implementing agencies. I personally have been working since the early 1980s on the development of this methodology. I have worked on organising about 70 immersions of different types and duration, first as head of the BMZ Joint Working

Group and later with the Commission for Justice and Peace and its successor organisations.

How immersions came about

Immersions were developed, more or less simultaneously, in the early 1980s by two different institutions:

- the Joint Working Group 'Fighting Poverty through Participatory Approaches' of the BMZ; and
- the German Commission for Justice and Peace, a church-related NGO for development education, advocacy, peace issues, and human rights in Germany.

Given the unsatisfactory results of poverty alleviation during the first two decades of German development cooperation and the differing development aid ideologies, the challenge was to find ways and means to improve the impact of the German aid system. We wanted to create – through dialogue with civil society – a general consensus on the basic issues of pro-poor participatory development policy and practice.

The trigger for the BMZ's initiative was a cross-sectional evaluation of the 80 state-owned development banks. These had been promoted for many years under financial development cooperation with an annual amount equivalent to 150 million euros. The result of the evaluation sent

shockwaves through the Government, forcing the BMZ to react. The evaluation showed – exemplified in concrete **figures** – that the average final loans of amounts equivalent to 60,000 euros did not actually reach the poor people in the countries concerned. As a result, in 1983, the BMZ established the Joint Working Group with the mandate of proposing viable solutions to improve official aid instruments – especially financial ones – and promote participatory approaches and self-help. In this way, the target groups of development cooperation – the poor – could be reached and benefit directly from the official assistance provided.

Structural changes in national policy mean changes in the three interrelated dimensions that determine a ‘**structure**’:

- changes in pro-poor development policy;
- changes in promotional concepts or administrative regulations (i.e. **instruments**); and
- changes in the daily **practice** of development cooperation, which depend in large part on the **mindset** and **behaviour** of the ‘bureaucrats’ responsible for this policy.

In a way, the process which took place in the German development administration between the 1980s and 1990s can be seen as an attempt to reform **from within**, using participatory means. It tried to discover to what extent and under what conditions the administrative system could be renewed.

What is an immersion?

Immersion, in the German context, is a **person-to-person encounter**. During an immersion, people from developed countries or people who are relatively well off stay for a few days with people who live in poverty and are struggling to achieve a decent life by their own efforts. It is a short, *in situ* encounter with the reality of poverty and exclusion.

For the visitors, the immersion process marks the beginning or the deepening of a personal path. If successful, it leads step-by-step to personal answers to many questions such as:

- Is this the way I imagined poverty to be?
- What links me to the person I am encountering during the immersion? Is it more than compassion?
- Has my will to express solidarity with the poor in a practical way increased?
- Have I expanded my competence – whatever it may be – to find efficient solutions in the fight against poverty?

And also:

- What inner commitment am I making towards this person who has granted me her hospitality and received me in her house?

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- Do I actually want to go that far?

An immersion normally lasts 5 to 8 days and is structured in three phases:

- immersion;
- reflection;
- dialogue.

Immersion

In the first phase of the encounter, visitors live with the host family for 2 to 3 days in groups of two, preferably a man and a woman. They participate in the host’s daily life, in the work that needs to be done in the house, land, or community. They live, eat, and sleep – when possible – with their host family. Facilitators, i.e. expert intermediaries for communication, ease this encounter.

Reflection

In the second phase, visitors as well as hosts and facilitators reflect for 1 to 2 days on their immersion, individually and jointly. This phase is about deepening the significance of their experiences:

- What is not just coincidental or unique but **exemplary and typical**?
- How is the micro level linked with the framework and conditions of the macro level?

The reflection and dialogue are based on participants’ experiences. They speak about and reflect on their encounter. **This is a strictly inductive process.**

Dialogue

In the third and final phase, also lasting 1 to 2 days, all the immersion’s actors come together: host families, visitors, facilitators, and the host organisation. Now it is a question of summing up, concluding each person’s own work, and starting the follow-up process.

Although these three phases take place in succession,

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they are practised **continuously** in each component of the programme. Participants are always in dialogue, with their hosts and their exposure partner; there is always something happening that invites them to reflect.

Where we are now? Conceptual developments and outcomes

An analysis of the path covered since the early 1980s shows four main processes in the reform of the German aid system. Ultimately, these also determined the methodological development of immersions. These processes (described further below) are:

- personalisation of the poverty issue;
- acquisition of appropriate technical competence;
- structural integration and impact; and
- growing institutional spread.

Personalisation of the poverty issue

Through the experience of meeting poor people face-to-face, participants in immersions go through a process of **personalisation** of the poverty issue and commitment to action. Immersions also deepen insights into the creative potential of the poor, something that is indispensable in the shaping of pro-poor policies. These moving insights into the struggle of those trying to overcome poverty can inspire participants to support the efforts of the poor.

Since the first immersions took place in 1992, more than 800 participants in total have taken part. Participants have been mainly key persons such as members of parliament and decision makers from the BMZ, development organisations, and civil society. Their willingness to participate can be seen as an expression of a felt need and a personal interest to meet poor people person to person, and to get first-hand insights into their strategies for overcoming poverty.

Acquiring appropriate technical competence

Immersion can be beneficial in improving the technical competence of key development actors in shaping instru-

ments to promote pro-poor development. The recognition and inclusion of microfinance as a component of the BMZ's Financial Aid System is one example. Eight technical immersions with innovative micro-banks were held between 1992 and 2001, involving about 150 specialists in microfinance and members of the Joint Working Group. These provided the basis for the introduction of this pro-poor strategy.

Structural integration and impact

Policy makers and decision makers who have taken part in immersions have substantially contributed to the adoption of innovative, pro-poor policies and concepts in the BMZ. These include 'Fighting poverty through participatory approaches and self-help'. This was elaborated in an intensive dialogue with some of the main immersion partners, namely SEWA (India), Grameen Bank (Bangladesh), and WOTR (Indo-German Watershed Development Programme).

The change in the rules governing the Financial Cooperation Budget, which made it possible to support participatory projects using grants instead of repayable loans, is another example. The allocation of 15% to 18% of the overall budget for bilateral cooperation to participatory pro-poor projects is yet another.

One important administrative regulation was the internal BMZ 'Directive for determining the poverty orientation of a programme', enacted in 1997. This directive is the formal basis for determining the proportion of funds allocated to pro-poor development cooperation.

These examples show the structural impact immersions can have.

Institutional use and spread

The example of the Joint Working Group of the BMZ in the 1980s suggests that a governmental institution such as the BMZ can use immersions as a tool that – together with other instruments such as case studies, action research, or policy dialogue – contributes substantially to initiating and implementing the reform of an administrative system **from within**. The vital contribution of immersion is that it motivates and predisposes senior officials and other staff to adopt a participatory approach.

Potentials and limitations of immersions

A number of institutions are now using immersions as a tool for promoting pro-poor development. The wide range of thematic and institutional applications for immersions, particularly when combining them with other instruments, is impressive. On the other hand, the fact that, at present,

only one donor government – Sida – has adopted immersions as an instrument for shaping its development policy is disappointing.

There is strong evidence that immersions help to gain access to the existing self-help potential of the poor. They can also deepen insights into processes for building participatory institutions and organisations which support the poor, decreasing their vulnerability to poverty as they move towards self-reliance. As the experience of the Joint Working Group of the BMZ has shown in the field of microfinance, these insights can be transformed – through systematic analysis, reflection, and dialogue – into incentives for the shaping of pro-poor policies and principles.

As an ongoing component of a specific process, immersions can stimulate or even induce reflection on the status quo and on change. They can help identify new ways of considering the real needs of the poor and make sure that they are the **subjects** of their own development.

Experience has shown, however, that immersions cannot produce institutional and structural impacts on their own, particularly not in just one programme. Institutional and structural changes are complex in nature and require **sustained** efforts and a multitude of actors for their accomplishment.

The acquisition of a specific **technical competence** for moulding concepts, promotional instruments, and mechanisms can be considered as a critical pre-condition for a sustainable impact and the spread of immersion as an institutional tool.

Finally, the reorientation of German development policy would not have happened without strong backing from the German Parliament. This support was built through the participation of Parliamentarians in immersions and the invitation of Muhammad Yunus (Grameen Bank) and Ela Bhatt (SEWA) to two public hearings. Subsequently, policy guidelines were deliberated by the Parliament in three plenary sessions.

The future

The New Aid Agenda

One of the most far-reaching changes in development cooperation in the past few years has been the transition from **project** aid to **programme** aid and the introduction of **budget** aid. Budget aid is combined with the expectation of improving the impact of development cooperation in terms of poverty reduction and growth through increased aid efficiency.

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There are three preconditions for the successful implementation of the New Agenda.

- A real commitment to reducing poverty by the recipient country's government.
- Agreement on basic principles and priorities between the government of the recipient country and key local actors. This includes above all the **active participation** of the membership-based organisations of the poor and representatives from local self-government.
- A consensual agreement on the priorities and conditions of cooperation between the recipient country and the donors, which recognises the ownership of the recipient country and is based on **partnership**.

Can immersions contribute to the practical shaping of such a demanding agenda in a meaningful way? Can existing immersion experiences help to conceptualise and complement existing instruments without stretching its potential too far? Can a way be found to multiply successful experiences through cooperation among the users and implementers of immersion?

This is a demanding agenda and I do not pretend to be able to answer all the questions that arise. The following reflection is no more than a beginning!

The role of immersions

The three preconditions for a successful New Aid Agenda mentioned above can benefit from the building of interpersonal linkages:

- Government decision makers can develop **interpersonal relationships** with poor people by meeting them person to person. They can combine their encounter with focused learning about the real needs and potential of the poor. The results of an immersion can find expression in a deeper personal commitment, which may have an impact on pro-poor decision-making.
- Immersions can be used for building **interpersonal relationships** between government representatives and repre-

representatives of civil society, especially people from membership-based organisations and movements of poor people. It can give them the opportunity to meet together around a selected sectoral reality, e.g. micro-insurance, primary education, or health. The impact of successful encounters and informal dialogue can be an improved understanding of people's needs and – again – of their potential and limitations. It can also result in **increased trust** between the actors, something from which the official national dialogue between Government and civil society can benefit.

- Joint immersions involving representatives from the recipient country and donors can contribute to **interpersonal linkages** from which the idea of a relationship based on **partnership** can emerge. Informal 'round tables', in which representatives from membership-based organisations, participatory NGOs, and research institutions may also participate, can substantially contribute to the creation of mutual trust based on the recognition of everybody's role and responsibility.

In this conceptual approach the notion of **interpersonal**

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linkages is used to underline the practical relevance of the suggested approach. It is not used just for the sake of dialogue or networking, but because of its contribution to the practical functioning of the relationships: it is the human element that makes institutions and inter-institutional linkages work.

This approach is based on the **culture of dialogue** – dialogue between decision makers and the poor, dialogue between state and society, and policy dialogue between the recipient country and the donors. Hopefully, it may inspire the structures of development cooperation.

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NOTE

A longer and more detailed version of this piece is available from Karl Osner.