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Immersions in ActionAid

by **SONYA RUPAREL**

Immersions are a practical and powerful way to experience someone else's life and to make a personal connection with the issues they have to deal with on a daily basis. ActionAid has been organising different kinds of immersions for more than 10 years. In the last 3 years it has been trying to use them in ways that have influence beyond the individual participant. Whilst ActionAid continues to use different models of immersions for different audiences, this article focuses on a multi-country initiative which aims to bring together development decision makers (donors, government officials, NGO staff, academics etc.) to learn directly from poor people. ActionAid sees immersions as one way to influence decision makers in an environment where the rich and powerful are ever more divorced from the daily realities of the poor. This article shares some thoughts on how the impact, influence, and learning from immersions can be scaled up.

Introduction

I found this an exceptional experience that enabled me to think more holistically about poverty and to really appreciate the constraints and vulnerabilities faced by poor people.

ActionAid immersion participant from the UK Depart-

ment for International Development (DfID), China

The external environment in which ActionAid works is changing. We are now seeing development professionals spending less and less time in the 'field' and more time talking with each other and with governments in capital cities, a consequence of the trend towards donor harmonisation and budget support. People from a wider variety of backgrounds are now moving into the development sector, with less experience of poverty on the ground. As a result, development professionals need to work harder than ever to ensure they do not reinforce the gap between rich and poor simply by the way in which the aid system operates.

Within ActionAid, our international secretariat is now led from South Africa. We are committed to rooting ourselves more deeply in the South, and our policy and influencing work is growing. Even so, we are finding that it is not only governments and donors that are at risk of losing their links with communities; international NGOs such as ActionAid face the same challenge.

In this environment we have to keep asking these questions:

- how do development professionals know that the decisions they take will have a positive impact on those living in poverty?

Kate Newman helps with the cooking during an ActionAid immersion in Bangladesh.



Photo: Kate Newman

- how can poor people influence the forces that affect their lives?

ActionAid grapples with these questions in different ways. We believe that immersions can help us explore them in a very direct and powerful way.

Developing an immersion programme in ActionAid

In collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex, UK, we piloted different immersion approaches to develop a model that could help development professionals:

- challenge and test their pre-conceptions (in some cases misconceptions) of how people live in poverty;
- develop new perspectives; and
- strengthen their commitment to poverty eradication.

An ActionAid immersion brings together people committed to eradicating poverty with those who directly experience it. In so doing we make poverty personal. We ask immersion participants to leave their formal roles behind them and to make friends with their host family, building a relationship with the very people who may be affected by the decisions they take. We encourage them to look holistically at poverty, and to recognise that rarely can one 'issue' be divorced from another (e.g. food security from climate change, or from health and education).

The model we have adopted reflects ActionAid's strengths and is consistent with our aim of increasing poor people's influence on decision makers. In developing the model we had to consider six key challenges:

- how to help busy people make time to leave the office;
- how to meet donors' need to see clearly the value of an immersion;
- how to avoid immersions showcasing the work of Action-

Aid or its partners;

- how to tackle the view that immersions are 'development tourism';
- how to make sure that communities own the process and get something out of the experience; and
- how to show the impact of these experiences.

The approach we use is focused on the individual participant and their learning objectives, in such a way that it justifies their time away from the office and has a real impact on their work. We have found that a minimum of 5 days is about the right length of time: any less and the experience would be limited; any more and people might be less willing to take part.

One day is spent discussing objectives, raising fears and concerns, getting to know the immersion context, meeting other participants and interpreters, and exploring relevant issues such as power relationships and roles. The following **3 days** are spent living the way the host families live: working alongside them, cooking with them, eating with them, and getting to know them. Participants often say that they learn a great deal just from being there in the evenings and joining in their hosts' conversations. **The last day** is spent in reflection, discussing what has and has not been learnt, understanding how far objectives have been met, learning from other people's experiences, and talking about what has struck home. Participants are likely to learn a great deal more through this kind of experiential learning than they would in a formal, capital city-based workshop of equal length.

Three key elements of an ActionAid immersion

The approach we have adopted relies on three key factors to ensure that participants can achieve their objectives in a meaningful way.

Trained immersion facilitators

Trained immersion facilitators help participants understand whether their objectives are achievable, how they might meet them, and what they have learnt through the immersion. There are no typical objectives, since these are specific to the individual concerned, but some previous examples include:

- 'to understand the coping mechanisms in this village';
- 'to live with and be part of a rural family for a while'; and
- 'to understand the process of decision-making in this community'.

Immersion is not the solution to understanding poverty, and the facilitator's role is to help participants

DfID staff help to prepare the family meal on an immersion in China.



Photo: ActionAid

understand how far they can apply what they have learnt from one experience, with one family, in one community, and one country to broader development thinking and policy.

We do expect that participants will strengthen their commitment to poverty eradication, and be able to put a real person's face to the discussions they have when they return to their workplaces. We hope that an immersion gives credibility to these discussions, although a fine line must be drawn so that one immersion doesn't set people up as 'experts'. A good facilitator will help work through many of these issues.

Broad participation

Different perspectives can lead to deeper learning. Our ideal is to include representatives from three or four donor agencies, government, other NGOs, academic institutions, and specialist development organisations on the same immersion.

Conversations with host families have raised questions about why foreigners are willing to spend time with ordinary people but not their own government. We have no wish to reinforce views that 'white people bring development'. For this reason we have learnt that it is important to try and include someone from local or national government in the immersion group. However, the power issues involved, and the difficulties facing government officials in leaving their positions behind when they have an ongoing relationship with the community in question (whether direct or indirect), mean that this brings its own challenges. One ActionAid country programme concluded that local authority representatives should not take part in immersions in their home areas.

Good interpretation

The interpreter has enormous power in an immersion. A good interpreter does not only translate conversations between the family and the participant. He or she is also a

cultural guide, and should be sensitive to the participants' needs and put them at ease. We have documented in more detail what we think makes a good interpreter (see Jupp, Section 2). But despite the training programmes we run, success is highly dependent on personality. Finding the right person, with the right language skills, can be difficult.

Lessons learnt

The overall lesson from all the countries which have organised immersions is the value of experience and reflection. More specifically, we have learnt the following.

- **Our approach is informal and flexible.** As a result, each immersion can be radically different from the next. A different group of people bring their different views and ideas to each immersion experience. At the beginning we thought that there would be more uniformity, but experience has shown us that each context is so different that if we tried to impose more standardisation, participants would probably take less away from the experience. Thus it is critical that we learn from each immersion and take time to reflect on what happened. Problems will always arise (a poor interpreter, an unexpected security situation), but we don't regard problems as issues unless we can't manage them. For this we need to be prepared for many different eventualities. However, we do want to be able to provide consistent professional expertise in interpretation, facilitation, and organisation. Further training, practice, and documentation will help address the challenges in each of these areas over time.
- **The post-immersion reflection is critical to success.** The discussion allows different perspectives to be challenged, learning to be enriched, and commitment deepened. It allows each individual to place what they have experienced within the broader context of the group's experience. Diversity of participants enriches learning. We have not succeeded to date in having participants from more than three organisations take part in the same immersion (and only one donor on each occasion). However, as we move the programme forward, we would like to encourage peers from donor agencies and representatives from government ministries or local authorities to participate.
- **Another lesson concerns the word 'immersion'.** Many different experiences in the field are called immersions, from day-long project visits to unstructured visits with no learning agenda. We have often talked about changing the name, or trying to 'own' a definition for an ActionAid immersion, but this is becoming more and more difficult as time goes on and as the word becomes more deeply

Kate Newman and Sonya Ruparel dressed in local clothing with a villager in Bangladesh.



Photo: Kate Newman and Sonya Ruparel

embedded. We are not yet clear whether any misunderstanding about the term will undermine our approach, or whether it really matters – as long as the value of spending time with poor people and learning directly from them is a central part of the experience.

- **We have learnt that the immersion facilitator must be extremely sensitive to the needs of each individual, and allow them sufficient space to express their views and concerns.** The facilitator can make mistakes if they are too intrusive, or not strong enough to lead serious, in-depth reflection, bringing out the real value of the experience for participants. It is easier for those who have been through an immersion to appreciate the power dynamics that we know are part of these experiences.

Institutionalising immersions in ActionAid

Despite our chief executive going on an immersion, our HIV/AIDS team undergoing immersions, and staff in some countries regularly spending nights in communities, we have yet to institutionalise this way of thinking as an organisation ourselves.

There is some resistance to the idea of immersions, not by those who have experienced them, but by those who are reluctant to do so. The usual reason for not participating is: 'I don't have the time.' This usually means: 'I can't, or won't, make this my priority for my time.' We manage to make time for workshops in capital cities and for training courses, but we find it difficult to make time to spend with poor people, building relationships with them, and really listening to the voices that we don't usually hear.

Another reason given for not doing immersions is: 'I come from a village, I don't need to do this.' While it is often the case that staff have such a background, an immersion offers an opportunity for them to stay with different communities

Tom Sharman joins in with the local dance routine in Khosolo, Malawi.



Photo: Tom Sharman

that don't know them, their roles, and their status. Moreover, an immersion can bring a different perspective. One ActionAid programme co-ordinator commented that the immersion he helped facilitate in a village in Ghana, where he had also worked while previously employed with local government, allowed him to see things in ways that he had been unable to do before. Nevertheless, there continues to be some resistance to this view – perhaps inevitably, since it challenges people's belief in what they know.

What's the future for ActionAid and immersions?

One of our successes, in developing this approach jointly with IDS, is encouraging greater interest from donors. Many of their staff now understand and talk about immersions.

Ongoing discussion with donors such as DfID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has led to their participation in ActionAid immersions in some countries, and also their adoption of other models. We had hoped to create greater demand by encouraging donors to see immersions (or similar experiences) as an essential part of the training and induction of key civil servants. We have yet to convince them to see these so holistically, but there are certainly seeds of interest, and we will continue to pursue this as donors increasingly recognise their value.

My belief is that in 2 years' time the demand for immersions might outstrip supply. The practice is spreading in part by word of mouth: those who do them in turn encourage others to do the same. But at the same time the capacity of NGOs to facilitate them is limited, and some donors have very specific requirements (for example in terms of the countries they would like as hosts). I would like to see us explore different ways of doing immersions, using our wealth of experience. I hope that there will be a broader range of participants in future, including those from the private sector. ActionAid also needs to think harder about how we can apply the same learning to places that are less secure and so unable to offer this particular model of immersions. We must always have an eye on the impact that immersions are having, and on whether or not we are achieving our objective of helping change happen through experiential learning. If we find that immersions are not challenging and changing people's attitudes, thinking, and behaviour, then we should stop organising them. I can't see this happening.

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