

# IDS Policy Briefing

The latest development issues for policymakers from the Institute of Development Studies

## Immersions for Policy and Personal Change

### Reflection and learning for development professionals

Senior staff in aid agencies are involved in daily decisions about policy and practice which have direct impact on the lives of poor people. But in a rapidly changing world, how can they be sure that they are basing those decisions on up-to-date information about what poor people want and would consider to be most helpful? *REALISE* is a participatory approach to learning, whereby staff from policy institutions and donor agencies spend a few days living and working with host families in a poor community. This enables them to engage in critical self-reflection both on their own and in a facilitated group and can bring long-term benefits to the practice of development. The experience increases motivation and commitment and the personal contact ensures that poor people's voices and perspectives are heard and integrated into new policy approaches and practice at senior level.

### On the spot learning for better policy and practice

Many development agency staff today spend much of their time on policy dialogue and on the aid instruments and donor coordination that support this dialogue. At the same time, they frequently lack direct contact with the lives and perspectives of the very people they are employed to help.

There are many reasons why such contact is important:

- One of the crucial factors helping an organisation achieve its goals is the knowledge of its staff. Direct, lived experience of the environment the organisation is seeking to change is an important source of such knowledge.
- The rapidly changing realities of poor people's lives and aspirations means that direct experience of that reality fast becomes out of date. Making assumptions from knowledge based on long ago experience can lead to erroneous conclusions.
- It gives energy, confidence and commitment, and the authority to make a case derived from face-to-face encounters.
- Direct experience followed by critical questioning and reflection leads to deeper understanding and enhanced responsiveness to a complex development process.



**Praful Patel, Vice-President of the World Bank (South Asia) with his host and facilitator in Gujarat**

Robert Chambers/IDS

### REFLECTIONS

'I have asked myself what would have happened if I had spent one week per year in a village somewhere over the last decade... Ten different contexts, and a number of faces and names to have in mind when reading, thinking, writing, taking decisions and arguing in our bureaucracy.'

*Interview in Irvine, Chambers and Eyben, forthcoming*

'Witnessing the life of a family that has no assurance that it can survive until the next harvest, going to bed at 8pm because there is no light and nothing else to do and talking with parents and children who have no expectations that government will improve their lives, had a remarkable effect upon me.'

*World Bank n/d, GRIP Guidelines*

'Reality checks' and 'immersions' – what we call *REALISE* events (reflective experiences and learning in situ encounters) – are a means which different groups and organisations currently practise to achieve this direct contact. *REALISE* events are designed for visitors to stay for a period of several days, living with their hosts as participants, as well as observers, in their daily lives. They are very distinct from project monitoring or highly-structured 'red carpet' trips, when officials make brief visits to a village or urban slum and risk drawing generalised conclusions based on one conversation with one local inhabitant which could have a disproportionate influence over subsequent recommendations or decisions.

Of course, aid agency staff living in a recipient country can meet poor people in their everyday lives, by taking the bus rather than a private car or by shopping in the local market. Nevertheless, setting aside a few days at regular intervals for the structured, experiential learning offered through immersions can stimulate and reinforce that day-to-day engagement and reflection. It may be as important for government officials and national staff in aid agencies as for expatriates. Officials, researchers and NGO activists working at the global level would also benefit immensely.

## What are immersions?

Social analysts, particularly those with a background in social anthropology and 'participant observation' methods, have long practised immersion visits by staying with local people in villages as part of a research programme or consultancy assignment. Some who now work inside international agencies

continue to practise immersions as and when feasible. For their colleagues, without similar training and experience, such self-organised immersions are much more challenging. This is why over the last few years different organisations have been experimenting with providing structured immersions.

While there is a long history of organised immersions, particularly in volunteer-sending organisations such as the Peace Corps and Voluntary Service Overseas, they have become more significant in recent years. The German Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP) developed by Karl Osner has established the benchmark for current approaches. Immersions are regularly used for staff induction and training by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, by ActionAid and by the World Bank. The Swedish aid agency Sida use them as an integral part of a workshop or meeting, with staff spending time in a village prior to the formal proceedings. Jupp (2004) describes how Swiss agency (SDC) staff in Tanzania have combined immersions with conducting their own research on poverty. The new British High Commissioner to India had an immersion arranged for him by ActionAid. Immersions can be an open-ended way of learning about the reality of people's lives or can be designed to focus on a particular issue. For example, EDP and SEWA together with Cornell University organised a visit recently for a group that included macro-economists as part of a dialogue about labour markets and trade issues. Other professional groups interested in focused immersions might be those working, for example, in health or agricultural research policy.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Questions about immersions are generally of two kinds. The first are about how to convince managers that this is an important part of the job and not just 'development tourism' or an excuse to get away from the overloaded in-tray. Satisfactory answers depend on establishing appropriate enabling context.

The second set concern arrangements: How will we avoid imposing an unnecessary burden on our hosts? What do we need to avoid doing so as not to erect barriers between us and them? What do we do about the language? What happens if I fall ill? Will I have any privacy for washing and going to the toilet? How will families be chosen? What is their benefit from participating? How do we avoid the facilitating organisation pushing its agenda? How many of us should go? How do we avoid swamping our hosts? And, importantly, how much will it cost?

There is no single good answer to these and similar questions but there is a growing body of good practice about how to design and implement immersion visits so that both the host family and visitors gain from the experience, as well as the wider host community and the organisation from which the visitors come.

## WELL-KNOWN IMMERSION PROGRAMMES

**The Association for the Promotion of North-South Dialogue is a non-profit organisation established and supported by the German Catholic Church and associated bodies. Since 1985 it has organised more than 50 EDP visits in different parts of the world for key agency staff and policymakers. Typically, participants stay with their hosts for three days, learning about their life stories. This is followed by a phase of reflection and dialogue involving the local facilitating organisation.**

**The Grass Roots Immersion Programme (GRIP) of the World Bank was designed as part of the staff management development programme. The aim was to complement the academic component at Harvard University and to encourage staff 'to fight poverty with a passion'. Immersion visits have been most common in South Asia and typically involve staying with a family, visiting NGO projects and meeting with government officials.**

potential to fundamentally change the way we work and ultimately see the come about by any one event, but rather through a shift in one's worldview. ”

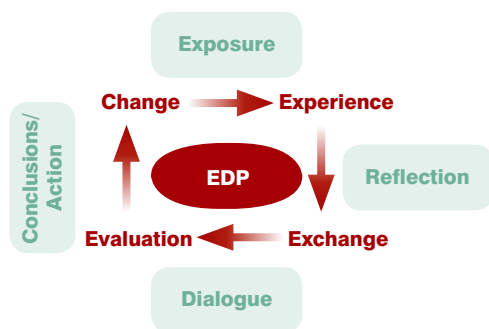
### Designing the visit

Organised immersions tend to work best when they involve a group of 10 to 15 people, but there are no hard and fast rules about this. The group can be from a single office or may come from different departments across an organisation, including personnel and finance. Less common but worth considering is to make up a group of aid agency and recipient government staff travelling together.

The visitors come together for pre-visit orientation and post-visit reflection sessions. Ideally, these sessions should take place in simple accommodation, such as a small hotel or guesthouse, in the region itself. For the actual visit participants divide into same-sex pairs to stay in different communities. A recommended overall duration could be about one week. Including time for travel, this would consist of one day for orientation, three days in the host community and two days for post-visit reflection.

### The conceptual working of the Exposure and Dialogue Programme

Source: adapted from EDP Guidelines, 2000



Pre-visit orientation is very important. Participants receive practical advice on what to expect and how to behave. Reading packs on local issues and on the community they are to visit are useful. The location, structure and focus of the visit itself should be selected according to the learning needs of the participants. Urban locations have the advantage of proximity and accessibility, while rural locations have the advantage of more space, easier lodging possibilities and greater security. Within the community, the programme can be more or less organised according to the

wishes of the visitors and the hosts. Many visitors like to spend most of the time with their host families, helping them with daily tasks. Learning a life history is another activity.

Reflection is a key part of the learning cycle. It may help each participant to draw up a checklist of things to look for and to use this in their reflection session. The participation of the hosts in these sessions can deepen mutual critical learning. The EDP approach is for participants to meet up and stay as a group somewhere close to where the visits took place. Each participant has space and time for individual reflection followed by group discussion and dialogue with the facilitating organisation.

An immersion usually requires the organising agency to request the services of a facilitating organisation that is already known in the region and has the trust and confidence of local communities. This could be a local government body, an NGO, a research institute, a consultancy company, a faith-based group or a network of local community organisations. The agency needs to clarify in advance mutual expectations and objectives with the facilitating organisation, encouraging it to be transparent about its own policy or agenda and to avoid turning the visit into a public relations event.

The budget needs to include the administrative overheads and other costs of the facilitating organisation, including the provision of interpreters, participants' travel and their accommodation before and after the immersion, medical evacuation arrangements, reading packs, and payment to the host communities. The total cost is likely to be very much less than the equivalent number of people attending a workshop or conference on poverty in the country's capital city.

### The hosts

The facilitating organisation is normally responsible for consulting with local communities as to where and with whom visitors should stay. It is also usually responsible for ensuring appropriate compensation to the hosts. Ethical issues in relation to visits include the impact outsiders can have on

local power relations, the need not to be a burden on host families, and the importance of avoiding raising expectations in the host community. On the other hand, there are examples of local community leaders welcoming visits in order to bring their concerns to the attention of people who can influence policy. Nevertheless, and without doubt, there are more immediate and significant advantages from the visitors' perspective. ActionAid India is currently undertaking participatory research into the impact on host communities. Findings will help inform decisions about the design and organisation of future immersions to ensure that the hosts benefit from the experience as much as the visitors.

### The enabling context

Immersion visits are a useful tool for development agencies who want staff to be reflective practitioners, imaginative and purposeful in working towards the agency's poverty reduction objectives. The following factors can enable *REALISE* to become a routine activity within an agency:

- Senior management setting an example and taking the lead by participating in immersion visits (regional and country directors have an important role in this, as well as those at the top).
- Building immersions into existing management development processes and training, including language learning.
- Making immersions an integral part of country strategy planning and evaluation processes.
- Having a designated person who is responsible for maintaining up-to-date information about visit design, budgets, terms of reference, details of facilitating organisations, names of former participants, etc.

The wider enabling context relates to how a development agency understands its role, including the emphasis it places on partnerships and the management of effective relationships, based on a shared understanding of the complex social and political realities that shape people's ability to move out of poverty.

## Assessing the impact

Evidence of organisational change can contribute to the integration of *REALISE* into an organisation's planning and training procedures. Its importance is the effect it can have not only on individual participants but also, through them, on the organisations for which they work. From a systems perspective, as elaborated by Senge et al. and others, this would imply seeing its potential to lead from small, everyday shifts born of greater awareness and reflexivity to systemic and cumulative effects.

Objective assessment is not easy. Each participant has a different starting point (in skills in reflective learning, in prior experience of staying in poor communities, etc.) making it difficult to capture the lessons learned and to compare or measure the change across individuals. Individual learning diaries, records of the group reflection and follow-up enquiries some months later are all ways in which the effect of *REALISE* can be more systematically assessed and reported.

### IMPACT OF IMMERSIONS ON WORLD BANK SOUTH ASIA POLICY: THE PAKISTAN POVERTY ALLEVIATION FUND

The Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) project is a direct outcome of the World Bank's first Village Immersion Programme (VIP). The VIP enabled participating staff 'to see the neglect and deprivation the poor people suffered' while simultaneously recognising 'that with the right kind of support' they could improve their situation. This led the Bank staff to 'transform the way the Bank does business in Pakistan' by developing an indigenous funding institution which would be supported by the PPAF.

In addition to being the source of inspiration for creating one of the most pro-poor funding institutions in the country, immersions are now being used in a supervisory capacity in the project. 'Supervisory immersions' have meant all stakeholders – Bank, PPAF and NGO staff – spend two days staying with local communities to assess the impact that the PPAF is having.

Source: Participant at IDS *REALISE* workshop, December 2003.  
See also [www.ppaf.org.pk](http://www.ppaf.org.pk)

## Conclusion

This Policy Briefing has been written so that knowledge about immersions will spread more widely among development organisations. Immersions are feasible and cost-effective. Involving a relatively low expenditure of time and money, *REALISE* experiences can enable organisations to check their assumptions about policy and practice against the reality of the lives of the people they are seeking to help.

While to date only a few immersion programmes have been institutionalised and carried out in a systematic way, their untapped potential is vast. They have brought enormous professional and personal benefit to many of those who have experienced them. Immersions can deliver deeper and better understandings of poverty, more committed and knowledgeable staff, improved relationships and teamwork among those who participate, and effective induction to a new country or environment, as well as contributing to more informed policy and practice at the macro-level.

### MORE ABOUT IMMERSIONS

Association for the Promotion of North-South Dialogue (2000) 'Exposure and Dialogue Programme of the Association for the Promotion of North-South Dialogue: A Brief Profile' (available at [www.exposure-nsd.de](http://www.exposure-nsd.de))

D. Jupp (2004) 'Views of the Poor: Some thoughts on how to involve your own staff to conduct quick, low cost but insightful research into poor people's perspectives' (available on request from [djupp@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:djupp@tiscali.co.uk))

R. Irvine, R. Chambers and R. Eyben (forthcoming 2004) 'Learning from Poor People's Lives' Lessons for Change no.13 (available at [www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/OrgLearn.html](http://www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/OrgLearn.html))

K. Osner (2004) 'Using Exposure Methodology for Dialogue on Key Issues' in 'Reality and Analysis: Personal Reflections on the Working Lives of Six Women', Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Exposure and Dialogue Programme (available at [www.arts.cornell.edu/poverty/kanbur/EDPCompendium.pdf](http://www.arts.cornell.edu/poverty/kanbur/EDPCompendium.pdf))

### FURTHER READING

K. Pasteur (2004) 'Learning for Development: A Literature Review' Lessons for Change no. 6, (available at [www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/OrgLearn.html](http://www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/OrgLearn.html))

P. Senge, A. Kleiner, C. Roberts, R. Ross and B. Smith (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organisation*, London, Nicholas Brealey

### CREDITS

This briefing paper was written by Rosalind Eyben with advice from Robert Chambers and edited by Caroline Knowles. It is based on Irvine, Chambers and Eyben (forthcoming, 2004) and discussions at the *REALISE* workshop held at IDS in December 2003.

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