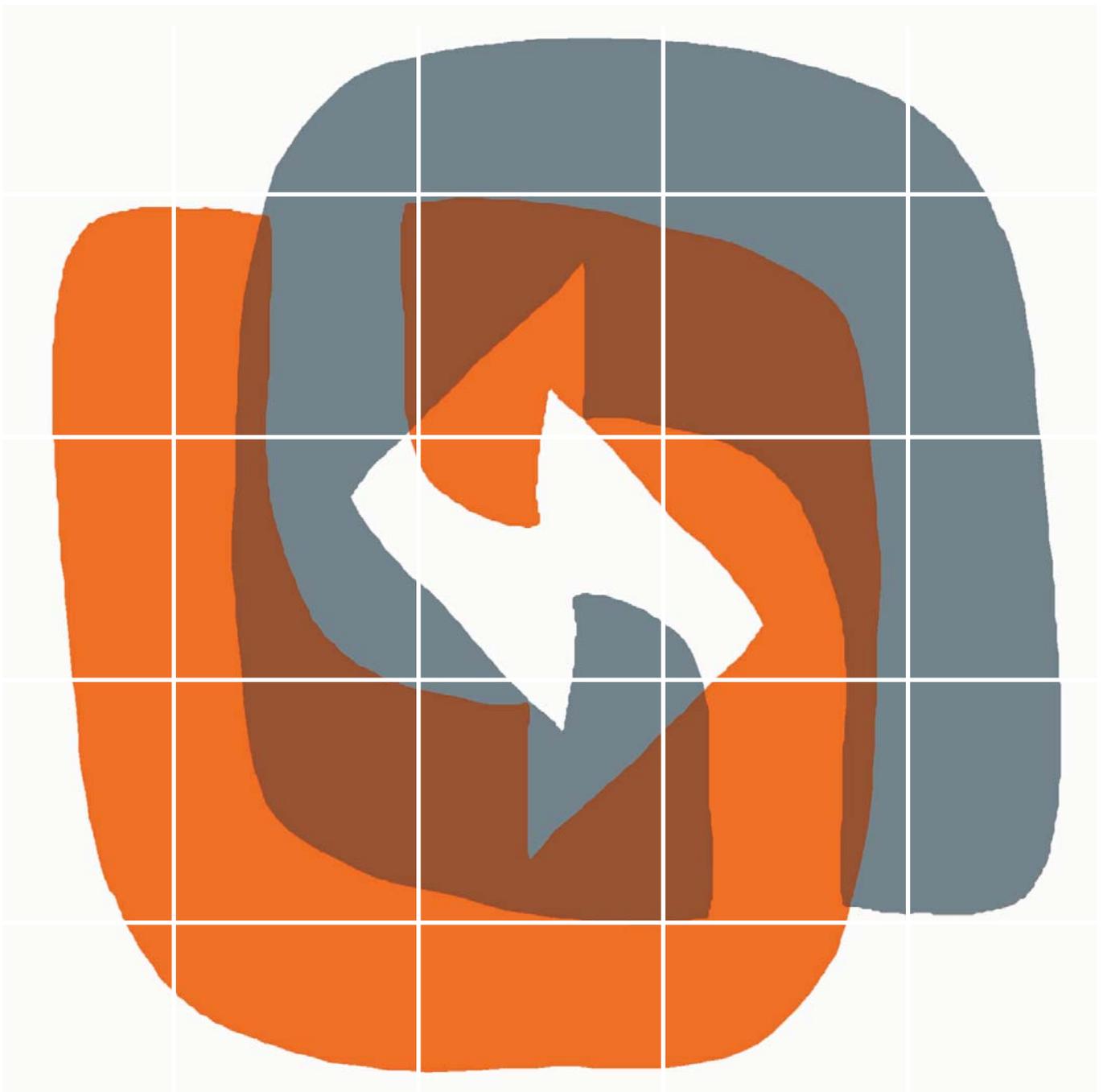# Learning from poor people's experience: immersions

Renwick Irvine, Robert Chambers and Rosalind Eyben

Background

'Immersions' are a practical means for development professionals to learn directly about the lives of the people their organisations are there to help. This paper draws on the practice and experience of immersions in developing countries, particularly those arranged for staff from development agencies, diplomats or visiting politicians. The process we describe has broad applicability and we hope this will also be a useful, practical guide for all development professionals, including public officials and staff of voluntary agencies, who seek experiential and reflective learning through engagement with the realities of poor and marginalised people.

Abbreviations and addresses

APNSD
Association for the Promotion of North-South Dialogue, Exposure and Dialogue Programmes e.V.,
Kaiser-Friedrich Str. 9, D-53113 Bonn, Germany
Phone 49(0)228 103 337
Fax 49(0)228 24 39 532
Email edp@exposure-nsd.de
Web www.exposure-nsd.de

DFID Department for International Development

EDP Exposure and Dialogue Programmes e.V (see above)

GRIP Grass Roots Immersion Program of the World Bank

NGO Non-Governmental Organisation

SDC Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

SEWA Self-Employed Women's Association, opp Victoria Garden, Bhadra, Ahmedabad 380001, India
Phone 0091 79 5506444
Fax 0091 79 5506446
Email mail@sewa.org
Web www.sewa.org

WDR World Development Report

VIP Village Immersion Program of the World Bank

WIEGO
Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing
Web www.wiego.org

Learning from poor people's experience: immersions

This paper is about the practice and the potential of immersions. Immersions are occasions when professionals learn directly from encounters with poor and marginalised people by living with them and reflecting on the experience. Those taking part may be the staff of bilateral and multilateral agencies, diplomats, parliamentarians, government officials, NGO staff, academics, or other development professionals.

We set out to:

- describe types and purposes of immersions;

- review practical experience with immersion design, logistical organisation and the host community;

- assess the rationale and impact of immersions, including better awareness of the realities of poor and marginalised people, personal and institutional learning and change, reinvigorated commitment, and influence on decision-making and policy;

- identify enabling conditions for making immersion experiences a normal, regular and expected activity for development professionals, together with good practices.

Most development professionals are directly or indirectly committed to the reduction of poverty and injustice. At the same time most of us are isolated and insulated from poor and marginalised people and lack opportunities for direct experiential learning about their lives and conditions. Today, aid agency staff in particular spend much of their time on policy dialogue, in workshops and meetings, and on the donor coordination and aid instruments that support this dialogue. Many are increasingly trapped in capital cities and lack direct contact with the lives and perspectives of the very people they are employed to help.

Why are such contacts 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 experience from long ago can lead to erroneous conclusions.

• Learning experiences followed by critical questioning and reflection lead to deeper levels of understanding and capacity for adaptation to complex development processes (Pasteur and Scott Villiers 2004b).

• Direct experience generates energy, confidence and commitment, and gives staff the authority to make a policy case derived from face-to-face encounters.

• Reading or participating in seminars on poverty can and should also be undertaken in the same reflective learning approach, but direct experience can engage the learner more deeply and, as Senge (1990) says, provide more opportunity for looking at the world and the way we relate to it in new ways. It provides the kind of learning that helps agencies respond intelligently in different or unforeseen circumstances.

• In the case of aid agency and INGO staff, if they do not make the effort to engage directly with poor people, they may be unintentionally signalling that stated agency concerns for part-icipation and accountability need not be taken seriously, and that poor people's own experience and ideas about their condition are considered irrelevant for poverty reduction policies.

Two of the international development organisations that have most engaged with immersions, the World Bank and ActionAid International, appear to be at different ends of the aid spectrum yet their rationales for immersions are similar. The introduction to the World Bank's Village Immersion Programme say they are 'an opportunity for the Bank staff to shed their Bank hats, live the lives of the poor and understand poverty in all its dimensions' (World Bank 2003). In the parallel Grass Roots Immersion Program a participant should go as a student 'to learn about the community's strengths, resourcefulness, and problem-solving methods as well as its hardships and struggles' and not as 'an honoured guest' (World Bank c 1998). Similarly, ActionAid India states that the purpose is 'to gain social empathy and experiential learning, through living with people in poverty, about dynamics and processes of their impoverishment, oppression, discrimination and marginalisation, and to apply these learnings professionally and personally' (ActionAid 2003).

'Immersions' or 'reality checks' are a means to achieve such understandings. They are distinct from normal brief field visits to a village, slum or project. Such visits, often highly structured and 'red carpet' in style, are vulnerable to a rigid pre-planned schedule, formality, shortage of time, a constraining political environment, and behaviour designed to please or gain benefits from the visitor as a funder. As one expatriate informant put it 'the whole process is highly ritualised and fraught with political significance around what foreigners can and cannot see'. Such visits also have other biases (Chambers 1983: 10-25) and carry the risk that one short encounter or constrained conversation with one specially briefed local inhabitant may disproportionately influence perceptions and subsequent recommendations or decisions. Immersions in contrast are designed for visitors to stay for several days with their hosts, practising reflective observation and participating in the day-to-day lives of their hosts and so gaining fuller, more grounded and more realistic insights.

Of course, development professionals such as aid agency staff can meet poor people in their everyday lives, by taking the bus rather than private cars to shopping in down town markets. Nevertheless, setting aside a few days at regular intervals for the experiential learning offered through immersions can provide a different quality and depth of exposure and learning about the reality of people's lives. Such experiential learning may be as important for government officials and national professional staff in aid agencies as for expatriates.

Immersions are useful for the staff of any organisation concerned with pro-poor policy and practice. They can be as relevant for ground-truthing and realism for macro-policy as for the micro-management of services.

The pressures of upward reporting and managing programmes in a timely and responsible fashion make it only too easy for staff to become distant from the day-to-day realities of living that confront those their work is meant to serve. Reports, useful though they can be for understanding some aspects of those realities, are no substitute for personal insights gained from living and learning in situ.

These have proven to be particularly helpful in triggering 'double-loop learning' which reframes a problem or issue (Pasteur 2004: 15 and Box 9 below). Whereas with single loop learning additional knowledge is acquired to support and strengthen what is already known about a problem, double loop learning provides knowledge that questions what was previously known and opens possibilities of alternative ways of tackling a problem. Such individual experiences and reframings can provide vital learning for any organisation working in a complex and rapidly changing environment. They can challenge implicit assumptions and help problems such as poverty to be seen in a new light, leading in turn to more relevant and responsive strategies (Pasteur 2004).

Immersions can be practised anywhere in the world. In the North as well as the South, they have generated powerful experiences and insights. The British journalist Polly Toynbee left her own middle-class home in London to stay in a council estate:

Watching it [the television] from here, I realised these are the only images ever shown of council estates - crime, dysfunction and disaster. Ordinary people who live here and in the thousands of places like this do not figure on the national landscape at all. They are the forgotten, the invisible. These are the badlands of national imagination, not ordinary places where nearly a third of the population live ordinary law-abiding lives (2003: 149).

In countries of the South, aid agency staff have reported how immersions can generate important understandings of contexts and issues, foster more passionate commitment, and influence decisions at the macro level. One aid agency staff member interviewed for this paper and who had experienced an immersion noted:

..staff were very hesitant to take part (in immersions); pressure of work, but…it is much deeper than that…there is a disturbing trend that seems to be going hand in hand with the shift to national influencing and budget support whereby few people actually get beyond the major towns.

Another commented on how immersions help managers appreciate the comprehensive nature of poverty and so experience the limitation of narrow single project interventions. And a third noted that immersions help create the

ability to put into words the perceptions of poorer people, more ability to empathise with their perspective, and more evidence on which to base arguments for the poorests' sense of dignity, capacity to participate when supportive conditions are provided, and as a reservoir of examples on which to judge a range of DFID's work.

In this paper we analyse experience and evidence in order to draw practical conclusions. Section One describes types and purposes of immersions. Section Two covers issues of design, organisation and the host community. The third section explores personal, institutional and policy impacts and how they can be enhanced. Finally we outline enabling conditions for making immersions regular and routine activities and summarise good practice.

1: Types and purposes of immersions

In development practice there is long history of immersions that aim to connect across different levels through living with local people to better understand their realities. The types of immersions can be described in various ways. Box 1 presents one way of distinguishing them.

Our classification separates them according to whether they are organised for groups as part of programmes or individually organised, and then by primary purpose, as in Table 1:

Box 1: An example of types of immersions

Joseph (1998) distinguishes between three variations of immersions based on their design:

• The 'abandon the participant' type where the aim is to experience isolation, hopeless-ness and some deprivation.

• The 'supportive type', which involves an orientation day (for a group rather than individual), a few days in a community using PRA techniques to interact with village people in attempt to understand points of interest and periods for reflection and write-up. This type decreases the stress on the participant and provides a more structured arena for reflection and learning.

• The 'understanding poverty' type, which links with a more formal workshop and serves as an illustrator of the lives of the poor.

Table 1. Organisation and primary purposes of immersions

		For a group			For individuals
Primary purpose	Application	*EDP*	*GRIP/VIP of World Bank*	*Other*	*Tailor-made*
Personal and professional learning and change	Induction for new staff or for new posting	SEWA's own staff in India	World Bank Young Professionals	No examples found	British High Commissioner in India. ActionAid India and Vietnam. DFID staff in Bangladesh and Bolivia
	Experiential as part of staff development	SEWA in India. Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. CENDHRRA in the Philippines among others.	Major purpose	PRA training, including PRAXIS	DFID staff in Bolivia and China
Grounding work in reality	Thematic, part of a workshop	WIEGO with SEWA. Also Cornell/SEWA on trade policy	Cases not identified	SDC, Ifakara, Tanzania. Sida staff in Africa	Not applicable
	Preparation for strategy or policy	Kanbur for WDR 2000	Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund immersions	SDC staff in Tanzania	Not applicable

Note: In practice multiple purposes are often served.

These are early days. Our sources are surely incomplete and more examples will come to light. To date, though, two things stand out: first, there is much scope for variety, adaptation and invention, and many more applications and variants can be expected; and second, whatever their specific purposes, the core and common strength of immersions is unhurried experiential learning, direct and personal, face to face.

A. By type

1. Organised immersions

Over the decades, there has been a steady stream of organised immersions, for example those of the Peace Corps, Voluntary Service Overseas and World Neighbours. However, during the past ten years a new movement of organised immersions has been quietly gathering momentum. Most well documented are the Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP) and the Grass Roots Immersion Program (GRIP) and the Village Immersion Program (VIP) of the World Bank. Examples of other organised immersions are given under thematic immersions below.

¹ The new name is now Exposure and Dialogue Programmes e.V. Since the papers cited were produced under the old name we are retaining that for the purposes of this paper.

The Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP)

The EDP of the German Association for the Promotion of North-South Dialogue (APNSD 2000, 2002a) is the best known of theprogrammes for groups. Founded in 1985, the Association has since carried out over 50 EDPs in different parts of the world. Development agencies that have participated include GTZ (German Agency for Technical Cooperation), BMZ (German Federal Ministry for Overseas Cooperation) and the World Bank. The methodology and its continuing evolution owe much to its initiator Karl Osner. The major aim of EDPs has been to 'give poverty a face' and motivate key persons in politics, government institutions, civil society and the churches.

Participants from the North have been taken to stay with people in South who are trying to improve their lives. Typically, a day of preparation is followed by two or three days during which the participants live with their hosts, take part in their daily lives, and learn their individual life stories. During a final two days for personal reflection and dialogue, participants think and talk about their experiences, often first alone, then with their hosts, and then together with the facilitators. The dialogue seeks to deepen understanding, to place the experience in a wider context and to determine implications for action. The figure below outlines the theory of the EDP process.
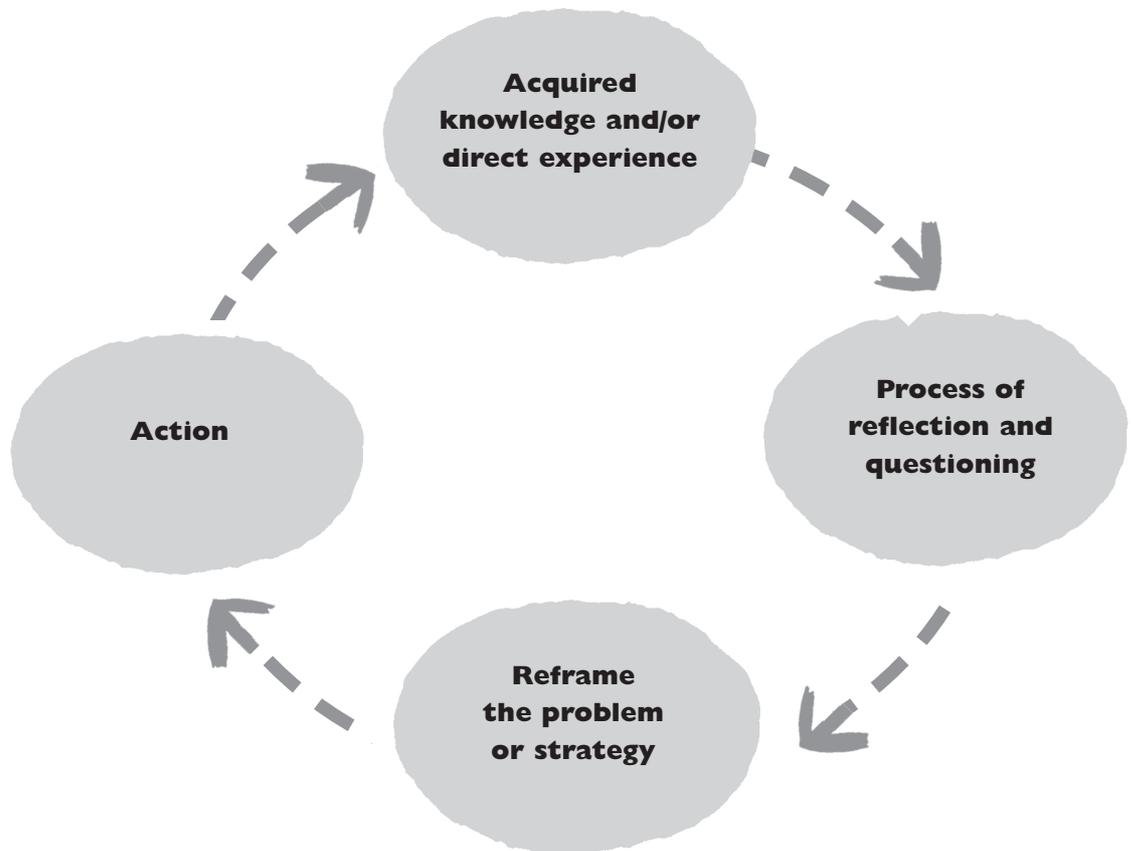
Figure 1. The conceptual working of EDP
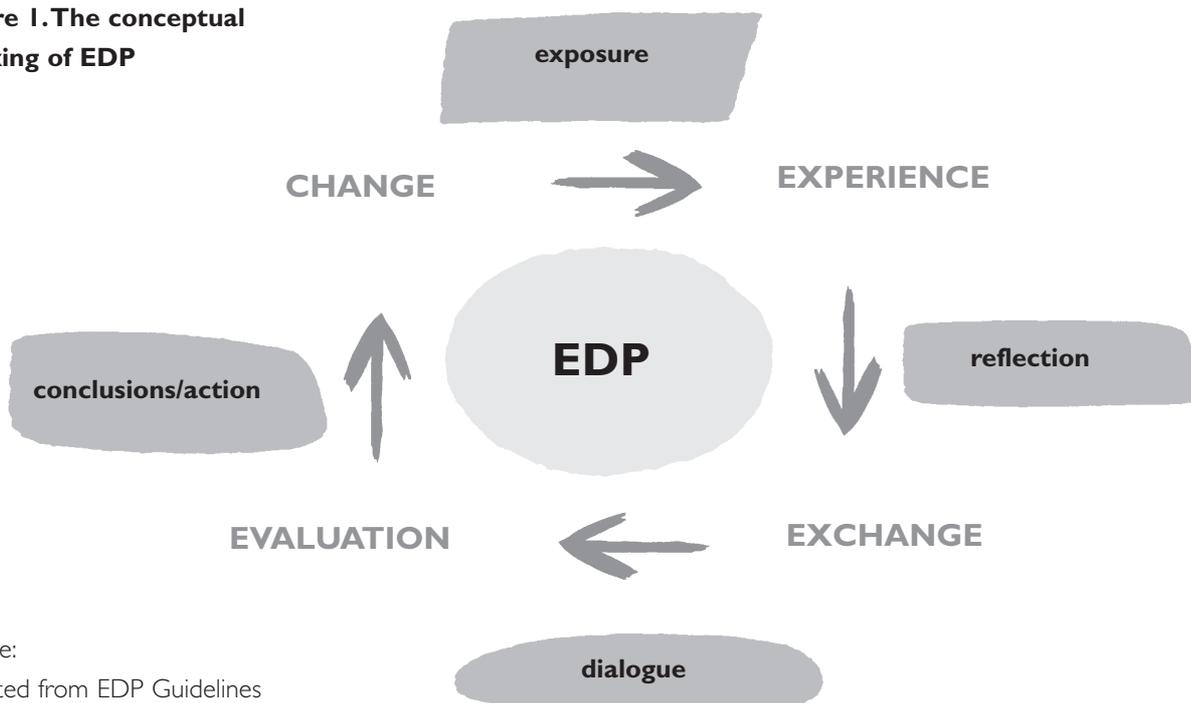
Source:
Adapted from EDP Guidelines
(APNSD 2000)

This process replicates the cycle of learning and action that has been developed as a concept in personal and organisational learning theory and is illustrated in the figure below (taken from Pasteur and Scott Villiers 2004a: 183)

Figure 3:
A cycle of learning and action

EDPs have been organised in collaboration with many organisations including the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, SEWA (the Self Employed Women's Association) in India, the Center for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (CENDHRRA) and Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD) in the Philippines, the Association Dominicana para el Desarollo de la Mujer (ADOPEM) in the Dominican Republic and the Centro de la Promocion al Laicado (CEPROLAI) in Bolivia. EDPs have been adopted by SEWA for induction and sensitisation of their organisers, have involved World Bank staff, and have also been used to explore a specific issue (e.g. Chen et al. 2004).

The Grass Roots Immersion Program (GRIP) and the Village Immersion Program (VIP) of the World Bank

The World Bank's Grass Roots Immersion Program (GRIP) was developed in the mid-1990s as part of the Bank's Executive Development Program for its senior staff. The aim was to complement the academic part of the programme at Harvard with a reality check, to reinforce '*fighting poverty with passion*' (World Bank c.1998 emphasis in the original) and to bring about value-based change. The purpose of the GRIP is described as three-fold:

• first-hand experience of living in a poor community

• opportunity to get close to ultimate beneficiaries

• new managerial knowledge at the service of the poor.

The Village Immersion Program (VIP) in the South Asia Region is a parallel programme of experiential learning involving a wider range of staff. The first VIP immersion took place in Pakistan in 1996. Since then almost 200 staff have taken part. The purpose is for staff to understand and appreciate the reality of the poor people who are the Bank's clients, and to rekindle their commitment to eliminating poverty (World Bank 2003).

Some GRIP and VIP immersions have lasted for a week (including travelling) and others have been longer. They have been organised through local facilitating organisations (FOs) and have taken different forms. These have varied from being unstructured to having an organised programme. Usually they have involved sharing daily life with a family in one or two locations. Other features have been visits to NGO projects and feedback and debriefing at district or other levels of government (see e.g. Narayanasamy and Boraian 1997; PRAU 1998; World Bank 1999).

2. Individual immersions

Immersions have been undertaken by individuals on their own initiative. In the 1960s and 1970s, Shri Mathur, a senior Indian Administrative Service officer responsible for agricultural extension in India, made a personal reality check by spending one week each year living in a village in Bihar. Social analysts, particularly those with a background in social anthropology and participant observation methods, have long practised self-organised immersion visits as part of a research programme or consultancy assignment, as have a few others in development agencies and governments. Self-organised immersions have, though, been exceptional. They have faced institutional constraints of time and approval and have sometimes only been done by taking leave. Several personal accounts of such immersions were given in response to our enquiries. For example, in 2001 several staff in DFID Bangladesh undertook week-long immersions with local NGOs with which they were working (Proshika and Nijera Kori). The stated purpose was two-fold: to understand the local context better for policy formulation,

and as part of personal language development. A similar immersion was undertaken by the country director of ActionAid Vietnam in 2001 to an ethnic minority area in the Northern Mountain region for one week. This was done alone with an interpreter. In 2003 the newly arrived British High Commissioner and a DFID staff member took the initiative to spend three days in north eastern Uttar Pradesh, India on an immersion organised at their request by ActionAid as an introduction to the realities of rural life and poverty in India. DFID staff in Bolivia as well as Bangladesh have organised individual immersions to improve their language skills.

B. By Purpose

Although immersions often have multiple purposes, they can be classified and discussed according to those that are primary.

Immersions for staff induction and sensitisation

In 2000 the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India initiated EDP immersions for its staff as part of their induction and orientation, to help them understand SEWA members and what keeps them poor as well as their strengths and strategies (Bali 2002). SEWA management sees these as important for creating or maintaining a pro-poor organisational culture and enabling new staff members to gain a wider base of knowledge and understanding. It helps leaders 'to be close to the members of their own organisation, to learn about the living situation, and to establish a personal relationship with the host member in order to understand her living situation and life story' (APNSD 2000). ActionAid India has also used immersions to sensitise staff, and to highlight the cause of the marginalised, as shown in Box 2 below (Chachra 2003).

Box 2: ActionAid experience with immersions

In 2003 ActionAid India recognised the need to encourage staff to experience an immersion as part of their efforts to develop capacity in rights-based approaches. Immersions are facilitated through field offices with certain marginalised groups. Through experiential learning the aim is for staff to achieve social empathy and become familiar with the dynamics and processes of the impoverishment, oppression, discrimination and marginalisation of people in poverty. The communities identified are Dalit and tribal groups, homeless people, street children, people with disabilities, those suffering from stigmatised ailments like HIV/AIDS, leprosy and mental illness, custodialised people, minorities and sex workers.

The immersion involves two people for a period of two weeks. An orientation is provided by the Regional Office, with a one-page factsheet on the community and key readings. The immersion itself includes not only living in situ but also working for the community during the placement. A simple analytical report is produced at the end, although no specific reflective period is identified.

Source: Chachra 2003

Thematic immersions

Immersions may also have thematic purposes. They have been used for PRA training, developing a new strategy or policy, as an integral part of a workshop or conference process, as part of research, or for combinations of these. To illustrate some of the range:

• From 1989 onwards, village immersions were part of PRA development and training in India. South-South international training workshops followed, and from 1997 PRAXIS organised annual International Thematic PRA Workshops with immersions as an element. In a variant, 'Win-Win' training immersions (Joseph 1995), villagers were themselves the trainers.

• In 1999, Ravi Kanbur and another member of the 2000 World Development Report team grounded their work with an immersion in India (Kanbur 1999).

• SDC in Tanzania has used brief immersions twice. In 2001, donor and NGO staff spent a day and a night in poor communities as an integral part of a learnshop on poverty and change held at Ifakara. In 2002, SDC staff were trained as researchers and spent days living with and helping very poor families (SDC 2003; Jupp 2004) (see Box 3).

• In 2002 WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing) preceded its General Meeting with rural and urban immersions for some 60 international participants hosted by SEWA members in Gujarat (WIEGO 2002).

• In 2002 the Africa Regional Department of Sida preceded its annual workshop of senior staff in the Africa region with an immersion on an island in Lake Victoria (Lotte Sylwander personal communication).

• In January 2004, Cornell University, SEWA and WIEGO broke new ground with a joint EDP in Gujarat. They preceded a dialogue on labour market, trade and poverty issues with 'exposure to the lives of six remarkable women' in whose homes they stayed for two nights and a day. There followed half a day of dialogue with the hosts present, and then a day and a half of technical discussions, after which the analysts wrote personal and technical notes, showing how the experience had influenced them and their frameworks of analysis (Chen et al 2004: 9-11) (see also Box 9).

Box 3: The views of the poor in Tanzania

Though not immersions in the full sense of this paper, the Views of the Poor Study of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Tanzania in 2002 deserves mention for its originality and impact. It was designed to assist in strengthening the poverty focus of the new Swiss Country Programme for Tanzania (2004-2010). The methodology was evolved through pilot testing. SDC staff were trained in participatory research. Besides focus groups, visual methods and participatory use of cameras, the major element was day-long listening, observation and interaction with a very poor family. This involved sharing their life, learning from them, helping them, and encouraging them to voice their ideas of well-being and ill-being. The participant researchers worked usually in mixed sex pairs, did not take notes (to keep their hands free) and were debriefed for several hours soon afterwards.

Examples of the many findings were: to 'shatter' the traditional view that children provide for an insurance for old age; that education without capital or connections was not considered enough for a better life and even a waste of time; that poor children were bullied in school and were more vulnerable to exploitation by teachers; and that medical staff were often rude to poor people and dismissive: 'You are nobody if you do not have money'.

Researchers were shocked and moved:

'I thought I knew about village life as my roots are in the village and I still visit family in my village from time to time. But I know nothing about what it is like to be poor and how hidden this kind of poverty can be.'

'I've worked in rural villages for more than 20 years, but I have never had an experience like this.'

'Even village leaders could not tell you what we experienced for ourselves'.

'I could not believe that the family only had one broken hoe to cultivate with. It was like trying to dig with a teaspoon. I will never forget that.'

'The image of the baby crying all day with hunger will always be with me.'

Sources: SDC 2003 and Jupp 2004

2: Designing and organising immersions

Design Issues

Design issues are shaped by purpose and include location, duration, numbers and profile of visitors, structure and focus, orientation, and reflection.

Location (rural/urban)

Rural and urban immersions have different advantages. Poor urban environments are closer and easier to reach but accommodation may be more difficult for lack of space, and risks of crime tend to be higher. Rural communities are less accessible and take longer to reach, but are usually more secure with more space. They may be more likely to be 'atypical' or to reflect particular interests such as those of a facilitating NGO. Also, it may be harder to convince participants to stay in slum communities when more comfortable accommodation is nearby.

Most organised immersions appear to take place in rural areas. There are fewer urban accounts, although some SEWA/EDP immersions have had an equal rural-urban split. Some programmes offer immersions in a sequence of two or more villages. While these can illuminate 'inter-sectoral linkages and village level inter-relationships (which) are invaluable in placing the learning in a holistic context' (World Bank 1999: 17), this reduces the depth of experience and the opportunity for building relationships, and travel time increases.

Remote villages which are difficult to reach differ from those which are easily accessible, and are often more deprived. Immersions in inaccessible areas entail the trade-off between travelling time and immersion time, and may cost more, though travel itself can be a significant experience. They may also be harder to set up: the facilitating organisation arranging an immersion for Eyben and a Bolivian colleague had to make special arrangements to contact the leader of a Guaraní community so that they could be met at an agreed time at the end of the road and be guided through the forest to their hosts' community.

Duration

The most commonly documented immersions have lasted from three days to two weeks. For convenience, a common length has been five to six days, taking a week in total including travel time.

Perceptions of the ideal duration vary. One source considered three days 'too short a time to gain a real understanding' of the lives and reality of the poor while for another five days was too long, with one participant suggesting that the programme be modified to 'drastically reduce the number of days spent with (the) villagers' (World Bank 1998). The World Bank's GRIP guidelines (c.1998; 3) state 'Ideally you will live with a family in a poor community for about a week (at least four nights) and participate in daily life'. Many of those we contacted pointed to the need for sufficient time to be allocated for the orientation, travel to and from the villages, adequate time in the immersion itself, and perhaps most important of all, long enough at the end for personal and group reflection.

How long people are prepared to devote to an immersion is an issue. It certainly appears easy for other, more apparently urgent priorities to take precedence. Being out of email contact for an extended period may also be a disincentive. It may be worth keeping the overall programme down to a week in order to encourage more people to participate.

Numbers and profile of visitors

A good group immersion programme matches the number of participants, the type of immersion, and the logistical support available. With EDPs and GRIPs, which tend to be heavy in preparation and logistical demands, and where group reflections are important, the number of participants should be large enough to benefit from economies of scale, but small enough to allow good interactions.

A common range which tends to work well is between 8 and 16 participants. The full group takes part in the orientation and final group reflections, but divides into smaller groups, often pairs, for the field experience (APNSD 2002a). This can ensure that no one hosting site is overloaded with outsiders, and that daily life is less distorted by the visit. The more visitors there are in any one location, the less informal the encounters tend to be.

The relative seniority of the members of the group is also significant. Power dynamics and institutional hierarchy have been observed in some GRIPs, such as the World Bank Indonesia immersions. Achieving a balanced and diverse composition of the group in terms of gender, range of experience, subject-area and seniority is emphasised in one set of guidelines (APNSD, 2002b).

Problems with last minute withdrawals, late arrivals and early departures have afflicted many immersions. In several EDPs there has been 'a domino effect whereby when one VIP drops out, the others follow' (respondent). The final list can change right up to the last minute. Whether these changes are avoidable or not, their costs are high. They disrupt arrangements and diminish learning from the experience: itineraries have to be changed, hosts are disappointed, and facilitators demoralised not least because of the waste of their efforts in preparation. For the participants who come late or leave early, relationships cannot be developed so well and the immersion experience is incomplete.

Structure and focus

The style, structure and focus of immersions all vary. Having clear objectives and shared expectations on the part of organisers and participants is vital (World Bank Sri Lanka, 1999). This can be done through communication prior to the immersion, and then revisited at the orientation session, and referred back to in the reflection (APNSD 2002a).

Immersions range from the highly structured or closed to the unplanned or open. Closed immersions have a sequence of pre-arranged activities such as meeting local officials, visiting schools, cooperatives and other local institutions, and participating in 'cultural' events. In these there is little scope for deviation from the set plan. Somewhat more open-ended have been immersions where PRA techniques and activities have been used to gain insights into aspects of a community such as its resources, institutions, problems and ways of working. Also more open-ended is the common practice of time spent with the family hosts, being taught by them and helping them in their everyday activities such as collecting water or firewood, cooking, washing, going to market and working in the fields. In EDPs visitors learn and later record the life history of their hosts. Other immersions have a theme or topic to be explored but no prearranged programme. In the most open of all, there is full freedom to wander around, to 'go with the flow', to see what hosts wish to show or share, and to follow up on whatever is significant, surprising and unexpected. The best combination is often a mix, depending on context, purpose and the interests of both visitors and hosts.

Orientation

Pre-visit briefings and orientation are an important part of the more organised types of immersion. These usually include discussing participants' expectations and creating a shared purpose. It helps for a group to reflect at the outset on its objectives and what the immersion is about (World Bank Sri Lanka 1998). These meetings range from a half day meeting in the office where the issues discussed are relatively brief and general, to a full day of more thorough orientation (see World Bank c.1998; APNSD 2002b).

Briefing and orientation is the time to deal with the schedule, potential technical problems, the methodology, and the objective of learning outcomes. This last can be important with any who have difficulties with an open-ended approach, being more used to processes which have clearer and more tangible outputs.

Reading packs on local issues, fact sheets on the communities involved, summaries of local history and descriptions of how the government and NGOs are working to serve the needs of the poor have all been cited as useful pre-immersion preparation if there is time to read them.

Reflection

The emphasis given to the phase after the immersion varies. It is can be seen as integral to the immersion process, as in EDPs, or treated as little more than an evaluation and feedback session after the 'hard work' has been done. Some immersions suggest preparing a check-list prior to an immersion of things to look for, and returning to this during the reflection. In EDPs reflection is seen to play a role in attitudinal change (APNSD 2000). In EDPs there are five steps of reflection or dialogue:

1. individual reflection

2. telling key stories

3. analysing and deepening the learning experience

4. joint reflection and dialogue of participants, facilitators and resource persons

5. reflection on consequences and follow-up steps

(Paraphrased from APNSD 1999 and 2000)

With EDPs at least as much importance is attached to the reflection or dialogue as to the exposure itself. It can take up to two days. It starts with self-reflection by the participant, and then discussion in groups of 4 to 6 participants with a facilitator. The process entails inductive learning from the experience, and includes identifying and sharing key stories. These have the purpose not only of 'giving development a face' but also of providing a

guiding framework or reference point and source of insights. In SEWA EDPs there is also a stage when the hostess contributes her experience of the immersion and her reflections, and facilitators and resource persons do the same. The final step is to make links between what has been experienced and learned and strategic and political aspects of poverty reduction, identifying practical implications and follow-up actions.

The best place for reflection depends on local conditions. One World Bank immersion had its wrap up session in the Hilton Hotel in Colombo. In general, it is good to find somewhere quiet, comfortable and without distractions near the exposure site.

Organisational issues

Box 5 below summarises issues that need to be addressed by programme organisers.

Box 5: Organisational checklist

• Choice of location

• Duration

• Numbers and profile of participants

• Budget

• Choice of facilitating organisation

• Interpreters and facilitators

• Means of transport

• Privacy

• Level of support provided

• Health

• Security

Of these, choice of location, duration and numbers and profile of participants have been considered above under design. The others are discussed below.

Budget

The budget for an immersion visit needs to include the administrative overheads and other costs of the facilitating organisation, including the provision of trained interpreters, as well as participants' travel and their accommodation before and after the immersion, medical evacuation arrangements, immersion packs (such as bottled water, if needed) and payment to the host communities. The total cost is likely to be very much less than the equivalent number of people attending an international conference on poverty in the country's capital city.

Facilitating organisation

An organised immersion visit usually requires the services of a facilitating organisation that is already well-known in the region to be visited and has the trust and confidence of local communities. This could be, for example, an NGO, a local government body, a research institute, a consultancy company, a faith-based group, a network of local community organisations, or as with SEWA, a trades union. Mutual expectations and objectives of the contracting and facilitating organisations need to be understood in advance, with agreement that the major purpose is experiential learning for the visitors not public relations for the FO. A general comment from those that have experienced organised immersions is that they would have wished for less of the facilitating organisation (usually an NGO) profiling itself in the immersion, although recognising the value that the FO brings. Ideally the presence of the FO should be low-key and not hamper free communication between host and visitor.

Interpreters and facilitators

A good facilitator and translator can make the difference between a fruitful and a difficult immersion. Often the same person can both facilitate and translate, having both the language skills and the local knowledge needed. The facilitator's role is to enable the guests to have a real meeting with their hosts, to understand each other and to achieve a close personal exchange (APNSD 2002b). The manner of interpretation is often a weak point in immersions. Training, practice and discussion beforehand is important to ensure that the interpreter or facilitators are fully dedicated to enabling direct conversations, and keeping the visitor continuously informed. Care is needed for additional translation where some in a host community, often disproportionately women, do not speak the lingua franca of a country, such as Mandarin in China or Spanish in much of Latin America, and would otherwise be excluded.

Transport

The use of public transport is rare but can expose participants to a range of experiences, with an appreciation of inaccessibility and travel time to essential services such as hospitals, government offices or the market place. In practice, minibuses or jeeps tend to be used to reduce travel time. In spite of this, arduous trips and a long time spent travelling has been cited as the part participants most disliked.

Privacy

For participants, often the most challenging aspect of an immersion is lack of or minimal basic amenities, and lack of privacy, for bathing and toilet needs. Experiencing such hardships can be important for appreciating the day to day lives of hosts. However, the fact that visitors are 'different' (often foreign) exposes them to a level of inquisitiveness from the local population that make bathing and toilet privacy all the more problematic. Sensitising facilitators to this issue and discussing how to handle it at the orientation session can reduce anxiety and awkwardness (APNSD 2002b). The issue may be more sensitive for women, a problem that may be partially offset by pairing female participants together. Failing to provide reassurance on these matters may be one reason why people are resistant or reluctant to participate in immersions. However, as one respondent suggests, while 'most expats would find such arrangements basic and unsanitary, with the appropriate kit and advice [problems] can be easily managed.'

Support

The level of support given to participants may entail a trade off between encouraging them to undertake the immersion and making it unrealistically comfortable. The less the support provided, the more the sense of isolation and

insecurity which some have found a significant experiential learning. One respondent commented 'Asking bureaucrats to immerse themselves in contexts in which their practical arrangements are very stressful can be counterproductive - if all the time is spent wondering how to cope with everyday needs it detracts from the building of relations with others.' Psychological preparation of the participants for living in villages with very basic amenities (roughing it out, sleeping on the floor, bathing outdoors, etc.) can help to get the optimum benefits from the exposure.

Health

Health can be a major concern and appropriate measures should be taken to ensure the well-being of participants. Mosquito nets and safe drinking water can be provided where necessary in organised immersions. There may be a pre-immersion check-list of injections, and pills etc to be distributed (World Bank c.1998). The distinction between 'support' and 'abandon the participant' style of immersions is important here, especially where organisations have a responsibility to ensure the safety of their employees. Ideally, a balance may be achieved where security and safety risks are mitigated as far as possible, while allowing 'the feeling of vulnerability and isolation'.

Mosquito nets, bottled water and other 'high-tech' equipment can be seen as sending negative messages to the communities, separating the participants when the purpose is to breakdown barriers. However, sometimes these can make suitable and natural presents to leave behind in the community. While health needs to be taken seriously, it may also be necessary to resist excessive caution as, for example, when 'The then Health Advisor (a doctor who is still in the system) opposed this most vehemently, saying anyone doing such a thing was putting their life at risk and he would take no responsibility for this' while at the same time making immersions voluntary, undertaken at one's own risk. The choice of location is a factor here: in one SEWA immersion, the location was changed to avoid an area with a serious outbreak of malaria.

² Reflect combines Freirian and PRA approaches for empowerment and literacy, and is now used by over 350 organisations in 60 countries.

Security

Safety is a common concern. Questions are quite frequently raised regarding how safe it is for staff to go into remote areas, whether for reasons of political disturbance, natural disasters, or political sensitivity. Trade-offs may have to be accepted: locations which are safer deny participants the experience of insecurity, but the loss of this experience may be slight compared with the gains from having an immersion at all (see box 7).

The host community

Host communities, or groups within them, can take responsibility for much of the organisation of an immersion, as with Win-Win trainings (Joseph 1995). The potential for organised and empowered groups like Reflect² circles to host immersions is yet to be explored. To date it has been more common for the facilitating organisation to undertake most of the organisation, including selection of host families.

The community may sometimes, however, be considered by the participants as too closely associated with a particular facilitating organisation with an 'agenda'. There is a danger then that perceptions and experiences will be distorted. In some cases the Village Immersion Programme has been in 'Bank affected' villages so that the participants can get closer to the real 'clients'. However, one person with such an experience commented that having clients as hosts 'brought the baggage associated with being a donor, of offering money, being attached to service delivery or benefits which distort what people tell you', precisely what the immersion aimed to avoid (see Box 8).

On reflecting on what justification for the immersion might be, a respondent commented:
'Could the role simply be: "I work for a donor agency and I am here because I think it would be good for my work to share a week with people in this village, to understand things better".
Would it be understood, or would they start making project proposals right away?'

Communities visited more than once will gain experience in handling visitors. On the other hand, other communities may resent any payments or other benefits that are received. The experience may also be less 'fresh' where the hosts have become accustomed to receiving visitors.

Payment for hospitality and other costs

Payment for an immersion is usually through the facilitating organisation (both the EDP and GRIP arrange it this way). All costs are covered and the hosts are paid by the FO for the lodging and food consumed, and compensated for their time. Doing this via the facilitating organisation is useful as it distances the participants from the 'messy' business of negotiating costs. However, in some cases, direct payment has been made to the family involved (as by ActionAid Vietnam), making even more transparent the payment for a service received. In other cases, payment has gone into community funds to support local development. Other options, for one-off individual immersions are simply to bring gifts, particularly items that are not easily obtainable for communities far away from a town or a market.

Views differ on gifts. SEWA strongly discourages them: immersions are a regular practice for SEWA staff, and gifts may change relationships and raise expectations in the future. In other immersions, giving small gifts for hosts or children is quite common and seen as an act of friendly appreciation. Insensitive or large gifts can draw undue attention to social and power differences and undermine the spirit of an immersion.

Ethical questions

Ethical issues are often raised, most notably regarding the impact outsiders have on the community (for example the selection of whom they stay with), on the host family and on how the power dimensions play out between visitors, facilitators or interpreters and the host community. A helpful approach is to draw up a code of conduct at the outset (Narayanasamy and Boraian 1997).

An immersion can raise expectations of direct benefits to a community. Normally there will be none, and clarity is needed on this. If there are to be benefits, for example payment to a community fund, that also needs to be completely clear.

How to respond to personal questions may be a challenge. When a World Bank staff member was asked in Indonesia how much he earned he answered honestly. He then found himself forced to justify his salary by explaining purchasing power parity but, as he recognised, this fell somewhat short of a satisfactory explanation.

Some who have participated in immersions have commented on the trouble and inconvenience the hosts were put to by 'looking after' them. This feeling of unease can be reduced by full involvement in daily activities and chores, and being sensitive as to when it is best to step back and observe.

3: The benefits of immersions: personal, institutional and policy learning and change

Potential and actual impacts of immersions are personal, institutional and policy-related, affecting commitment, insights, practices and policy. A successful immersion can lead to personal change through experiential learning, both emotional in how things are felt and intellectual in how they are framed; to institutional change through what participants do later in their organisations; and with decision-makers to changes in policy grounded in the realism of the experience.

Personal

Personal impact, learning and change are central to immersions. For McGee (2002: 36) 'policy makers' disposition for personal involvement with poor people in learning about poverty affects the soundness of the knowledge claims they can make.' She suggests that 'the promotion of personal experiential learning by the powerful, structured so as to maximize its transformative potential, is a promising strategy …' This would result in 'policy makers knowing poverty through immersion in the unfamiliar terrain of daily deprivation and struggle for survival' that has been outlined here.

Since experiential learning is at the core of immersions, impact varies according to personal predispositions and motivation. The quality and depth of the learning depends on the preparation and on what happens during the immersion, but most of all, and critically, on adequate time and space for reflection and questioning (Pasteur and Scott Villiers 2004a: 183).

Some people welcome and eagerly anticipate the challenge and learning of an immersion, while others are nervous and hesitant. Positive predispositions and motivation may centre on a desire to understand better the realities of poor and marginalised people, coming from combinations of:

• social empathy, concern for those who are less fortunate;

• reflective awareness of personal isolation from and ignorance of the lives of poor people;

• professional interest in topic-related learning and doing a reality check;

• wanting to deepen and strengthen personal and professional commitment;

• a desire to be more professional, for example in policy dialogue to be able to speak and argue with the authority of direct personal experience.

Views vary on how important personal predispositions are to a good immersion. Starting positions differ. One view is that a successful immersion requires an 'inner readiness' of participants (personal communication Peter Taylor 2004). On the other hand, some who have started as sceptics have later reflected that they have 'got a lot out' of the experience, even when they may be vague in pinning down exactly what it was. For example, one participant in the 1997 World Bank village immersion in Tamil Nadu, perhaps anticipating the possible reaction of others more sceptical, commented: 'I am convinced that it is necessary for all economists in the World Bank to have spent such time in close and informal interaction with such members of society' (Narayanasamy and Boraian 1997: vi).

The experiential nature of an immersion means that there are no benchmarks for how people have changed. Participants' different starting points in emotional intelligence (see the discussion of this in Pasteur and Scott Villiers 2004b), life experiences, local

knowledge and so on make it difficult to compare or measure change across individuals. The main evidence is personal testimony. For Ravi Kanbur (1999) his immersion was 'one of the most educational and moving experiences of my life.'

Box 9: Double-loop learning

Double-loop learning leads to fundamentally new ways of looking at an issue, or a reframing of a problem (Pasteur 2004). An immersion can also change a professional view. After staying with a SEWA member and watching a minimum wage negotiation, Gary Fields, a macro-economist wrote:

Because of what I saw on the ground, my professional judgement about minimum wages and supplementary benefits changed. With the standard labour economics model in mind, I had worried that the minimum wage might hurt the very women it was meant to help, because of a loss of jobs. In this context though the minimum wage does not act as a wage floor. It acts as an aspirational target...The very fact that a minimum wage is set at so (relatively) high a level strengthens SEWA's negotiating position...This kind of 'wage' increase is something that I favour. Without this experience on the ground, that is not something I would have said two days earlier.

Gary Fields 2004

Emotional engagement frequently comes out in immersion reports. There are stories, precious moments, anecdotes, surprises, relationships formed, new insights, and shifts of perception and attitude some of which may only emerge later with recollection and reflection. After a recent World Bank EDP with SEWA, Judith Edstrom wrote:

And my feeling that I have learned so much from this courageous woman, that my own sense of adversity pales next to what Kamlaben [the hostess from SEWA) has confronted and overcome. I feel humbled by this woman and believe that when a challenge confronts me in the future, I can honestly ask myself one of two questions. First, 'Would Kamlaben have this option?' to put the query in perspective. Or second, 'What would Kamlaben do in this situation?' Not in the sense of being confronted with the same challenges, but of seeking to find the straightforward answer that keeps close to the Truth—family, health, spirituality and, most of all, a sense of personal dignity.

How motivating an immersion can be was expressed by a GRIP participant:

On the surface, I saw nothing new during my trip. However, experiencing poverty at first hand, witnessing the life of a family that has no assurance that it can survive until the next harvest, going to bed at 8 p.m. because there is no light and nothing else to do, and talking with parents and children who have no expectation that government will improve their lives, had a remarkable effect on me. It leaves me even more committed to our mission.

Institutional

Institutional change through organisational learning can take many forms through changes in perception, behaviour and practice. Such changes may be difficult to document. If it is often difficult for participants to realise the changes they have undergone, it may be even harder to assess the long-term impact of their immersions on their organisations.

The human resources and finance departments of any organisation play a big part in forming and sustaining organisational cultures. Their staff may also be among those whose behaviour changes could have more impact, but they may also be among those less keen to take part in immersions themselves, or for whom immersions may be thought to be less important. Contrast the experience of Dorothee Fiedler of the German Ministry for Development Cooperation (BMZ). She wrote that one important outcome of her EDP immersion with SEWA was seeing 'that we have to be much better able to listen to the poor, instead of telling them what should be done to improve their situation.' As head of the committee responsible for hiring staff to work in the Ministry and abroad she did: 'much more than before the exposure to see to it, that we find people, who are not only very well qualified in arguing orally or writing brilliant papers, but who are also good listeners. It is …. sometimes hard to believe how bad some otherwise well qualified people are at listening' (personal communication). Changes like this may seem small and be almost unseen but their effects may be deep, wide and enduring.

The form of reporting back can feed into institutional learning and change. The World Bank has required each participant to file a two-page memo to the President of the Bank, regarding: '1) location and experience; 2) how this affected you; 3) can you use this work to strengthen your work in the Bank' (World Bank c.1998). Distortions were possible when 'people write what they think Jim [Wolfensohn] expects to hear' (respondent). Written reports do have their value, not least relative permanence, but verbal reports to workshops, seminars or meetings of colleagues tend to be richer, more memorable, and can be expected to have a different sort of impact (see feedback below).

All this said, it remains striking how few organisations have routinised the practice of immersions. For adoption to be wider and promotion more effective, more needs to be understood about personal, professional and institutional blockages, and about how bureaucracies can become learning organisations prepared to engage in the double-loop learning that immersions can offer.

Impact on policy and practice

A combination of empirical evidence and experiential understanding of poverty is powerful for influencing and guiding development actors. As an ActionAid staff member commented on an immersion in Vietnam, the objective was 'to have that feeling of poverty myself, so that the experience would guide my thoughts and actions.' The immersion directly influenced his approach to policy and guided the thinking, planning and design of programmes to take much more account of the felt needs of the poor. Subsequent to these positive experiences, ActionAid was planning in 2004 to institute this for all senior staff in Vietnam.

Immersions can give policy makers grounded empirical evidence and a clear picture to inform decision making. As pointed out in the EDP Guidelines, 'it is considerably easier for a person to defend opinions which are the result of vivid personal experiences' (2000). As one participant in an immersion in Sri Lanka in 1999 commented: 'as for the relevance of the experience, I can emphatically say that it was of great value to the work I do on rural development…This has given me some comparative framework to my current work on rural development strategy…' One clear instance of policy impact comes from Ravi Kanbur's back to office report (Kanbur 1999). His immersion gave him confidence, confirming the importance of risk and vulnerability which were to be prominent in the very influential 2000 World Development Report on Attacking Poverty.

Enhancing impact

The impact of an immersion depends on many factors, not least the quality of the preparation and arrangements, the orientation, commitment and influence of the participant, and then what actually happens. Beyond these, three ways for enhancing the impact of immersions stand out: reflection, feedback, and follow-through and reinforcement.

Reflection

A repeated weakness of immersions is inadequate time and process for reflection. Where time is short the normal reflex is to protect the immersion itself. The trade-offs here are hard to judge. Suffice to say a common complaint is that there was too little time for personal reflection. Taking notes, recollecting details, and thinking through what has been felt and learned should take place close to the time of the experience, and always before returning to business as usual.

Feedback

The forms of feedback and dissemination after an immersion affect the depth and breadth of impact. The acts of writing and speaking about the experience help to develop, clarify and embed the learning.

Accounts written with passion, honesty and detail can be striking, moving and memorable. They can take the form of back-to-office reports. Praful Patel, Vice-President of the World Bank for South Asia, produced and distributed on email a striking visual diary of photographs and commentary illustrating his experience. Some written accounts can have

big effects, especially if they are dramatic, timely, disseminated on email and websites, and feed into other processes of policy and learning, as did Kanbur's account (1999) of his experience in Gujarat with SEWA.

Verbal feedback has its own power. Informal conversations and stories which are told and repeated have a capacity to affect not just individuals but organisations (Denning 2000). Personal presentations have the added strength that we say things we would not write, say them more vividly than we would write them, and convey feelings directly. In the SDC Tanzania Views of the Poor study, researchers did not write reports but were debriefed in pairs (Jupp 2004: 10). After a SEWA immersion in Gujarat in November 2003, Dorothee Fiedler gave five presentations with slides in response to requests from her colleagues in BMZ, and Judith Edstrom of the World Bank had this to say:

'What has surprised me as I recounted my experience to colleagues at a departmental meeting, is that for every person who might be sceptical about the realism of this experience, there are more who have been touched by it— the Ugandan staff assistant who came up to me after the meeting and said simply, thank you for doing that; the Ghanaian consultant who came and showed me a picture of his poor mother sitting on the floor of her home, the Romanian staff member who immediately wrote me an email saying how my talk evoked the times when he lived behind the Iron Curtain and westerners would come for home stays, and how they would talk about human rights and other issues he dared not speak about with fellow citizens. Have you had such experiences?'

(Personal Communication. 2003)

Follow-through and Reinforcement

Memory fades and commitment wanes unless reinforced. The value of follow-through on the implications of what has been experienced and learned is obvious. In addition to the feedback of written accounts, stories and presentations, others are to:

• keep a reflective diary throughout, and refer back to it;

• maintain contact with hosts, the FO and with co-participants;

• encourage colleagues to undertake immersions, and help them to do so;

• make an immersion an annual event;

• work with human resources departments and others to institutionalise immersions as part of good professional practice;

• have a feedback reflection or reunion some months after the immersion, to review how much changes initially identified have taken deeper root (APNSD 2002a)

• enhance the enabling conditions (see below).

A significant institutional change is for organisations to adopt immersions as policy for their staff, as has done SEWA. While this has been done in the World Bank, at the time of writing we do not know of any other multilateral or bilateral aid agency that has followed suit, though individual managers in Sida, DFID and SDC have encouraged their staff. Those who seek to promote immersions need to be sensitive to their organisation's culture and priorities and what might or might not make a difference. For example, Sida attaches great importance to horizontal networks (Cornwall et al. 2004) whereas DFID is more hierarchical and tends to stress the importance of leadership (Eyben 2004b). These differences might imply alternative ways of deciding who and how to influence within the organisation to promote immersions. In an organisation where there is a strong value placed on solidarity with people living in poverty, immersions might be seen as a means to reinforcing that value. In an organisation where there is an emphasis on evidence-based policy, the advantages of immersions might be stressed rather differently. The way in which a participant reports on his or her experience may influence perceptions of senior management as to the wider utility of immersions.

I don't know that a general 'reflections of poverty' piece would work well as a Back To Office Report in DFID ('hasn't he got anything better to do?' would be the likely response). On the other hand a period spent in an NGO addressing domestic violence enabling comments on links to maternal mortality (given the ongoing obsession with MDGs) might have quite a big impact.

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

• senior management setting an example and taking the lead in participating in immersion visits; regional and country directors have an important role, as well as those at the top of the agency.

• building immersions into existing management development and staff training and induction programmes, including language learning.

• making immersions an integral part of country strategy planning and evaluation processes.

• someone in the organisation being responsible for maintaining up-to-date information about design, budgets, terms of reference and contact details of facilitating organisations, names of former participants etc.

• clear objectives and clear and sensitive feedback mechanisms, co-established between the facilitating organisation, the participant(s), and the sending institution, provide a good basis for immersions.

• a structure that is sufficiently flexible to be adapted to a particular context, followed and agreed to by all, is preferable; however some non-negotiables may help (such as the need for a thorough briefing, joint objective setting, sufficient time in the communities and for reflection, and a personalised write-up). These depend on the nature of the institution.

• a critical mass of previous immersion participants to help spread the message and encourage colleagues to engage would provide momentum. This requires a dissemination

strategy that includes different members of staff, goes beyond a written back-to-office report or memo, and creates alternative forums where experiences can be shared.

• facilitating organisations need to be supported by the donor organisations, both financially and with a long-term commitment to immersions. This may not be an expensive undertaking, but part of pre-existing alliances and partnerships (such as initially between Nijera Kori and DFID in Bangladesh). Equally, a careful assessment is required of how much the 'voice' of the FO comes through in the immersion to ensure that the exposure is not overly determined by the FO perspective.

• newly arrived agency staff in-country would benefit by spending some time in the villages or poor urban areas. This could be easily included as part of the induction process, and would have the added benefit of establishing rapport with a more established member of the particular mission (who should be able to do an immersion periodically). It could also be tied to language learning.

• the trade-off between scaling up immersions and their quality is tricky. However, as and when the opportunity arises to go to scale with institutionalising immersions it may be too good to miss. This may be true for both champions within institutions and FOs. Maintaining quality could be sought through strategic dissemination of best practice, a sharing of experience and inter-organisational training.

Conclusion: good practice for immersions

Immersions are a useful means for experiential learning that can lead to a deepening understanding of the reality of the lives of people living in poverty – and to a process of rethinking policy and practice to be more effective in supporting their efforts to achieve better lives. They are likely to be most effective if integrated into a wider systemic process of personal and organisational learning – a process that values reflection and relationship building as emphasised in other papers in this series.

As we have seen, key good practices for immersions include preparation through reflecting on the purpose of the immersion and the group and individual learning outcomes, as well as adequate and appropriate space and time for reflection afterwards and for sharing and providing feedback to others. Ethics are basic and participants need to be fully briefed and sensitive to how to behave well and in a culturally appropriate manner in their encounter and relationship with their hosts. Models in which hosts join in the reflection process are particularly to be welcomed and innovation in terms of 'reverse' immersions could be explored. Practical preparations are also important. The choice of a facilitating organisation is crucial and issues of when, where and how matter very much if participants are to reap optimum benefit from the experience.

This paper will have served its function if it contributes, however modestly, to the acceptance and adoption of immersions as an essential part of being a good development professional. They have shown their potential for experiential learning, for generating commitment, and for grounding in realism.

If widely valued, adopted and expected in development organisations, immersions could help transform power, insights and relationships, and make pro-poor policy and practices more focused, relevant and effective. Those who have experienced immersions often have a sense of achievement, confidence and re-energised commitment. Yet in 2004 immersions are still exceptional. When asked, development professionals rarely question their value, and often say that they would welcome the experience. But then nothing happens. There are obstacles to confront: personal - anxiety, hesitation and reluctance; practical - being uncertain who to approach to make arrangements; institutional – the demands of routine, negotiations, meetings, reporting, workshops, dealing with visitors and the like, and lack of incentives and the absence of immersions in personnel practices and appraisals. Some obstacles can also be interpersonal, having managers with other priorities or who do not see the point. But none of these is insuperable. Perhaps it is best to take the bull by the horns and get on with it, to experience and learn from immersions, and then to promote them, encouraging and giving space to others to do likewise.

Lying on a mud floor, in the middle of the night, looking up to the skies through big holes of a palm roof and not being able to sleep really makes you think: 'There has to be a better way for these people.'

Ridwan Ali, VIP Participant
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Learning from poor people's experience: immersions

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This paper is about the practice and the potential of immersions. Immersions are occasions when professionals learn directly from encounters with poor and marginalised people by living with them and reflecting on the experience. Those taking part may be the staff of bilateral and multilateral agencies, diplomats, parliamentarians, Government officials, NGO staff, academics, or other development professionals.

We set out to:

• describe types and purposes of immersions

• review practical experience with immersion design, logistical organisation and the host community

• assess the rationale and impact of immersions, including better awareness of the realities of poor and marginalised people, personal and institutional learning and change, reinvigorated commitment, and influence on decision-making and policy

• identify enabling conditions for making immersion experiences a normal, regular and expected activity for development professionals, together with good practices.

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