

Immersion

Making Poverty Personal



Why immersions?

Many development professionals find that the round of capital-city meetings and workshops, and the current emphasis on policy dialogue and co-ordination, leave little room for time in the field. Those who do travel are well aware of the limitations of heavily planned itineraries.

Immersion offers a more flexible, less structured alternative. They are a chance to test assumptions, to develop new perspectives, and to strengthen commitment to the challenge of poverty eradication. Immersion helps to put a face to poverty.



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?"

IDS Policy Briefing Issue 22
(see Further Reading)

What are immersions?

- A three-day period spent as the guest of a family in a marginalised community
- A professionally planned and facilitated process of experiential learning, supported by experienced ActionAid staff and partners
- An opportunity to understand the impact of policy choices on people and communities
- A cost-effective, high-quality development opportunity for middle-to-senior level staff from governments, donors, and other development organisations
- A chance to renew personal and professional commitment to the challenge of poverty eradication



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How do immersions differ from standard field visits?

Immersions exchange breadth for depth: they offer a concentrated period of time in the company of one family, rather than superficial contact with many people. They also involve overnight stays, which means that both visitors and hosts can benefit from the richer and more relaxed evening conversation. Participants find that this kind of environment allows them to appreciate not just the challenges that people face but also their strengths, resilience, and values – the richness of their lives.



“ I have asked myself what would have happened if I had spent one week per year in a village somewhere over the last decade. I am quite sure it would have made a difference to me. 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...”

Respondent quoted in IDS 'Lessons for Change' paper (see Further Reading)



What happens during an ActionAid-organised immersion?

A group of between 5 and 10 people spend a minimum of three days and nights in a village living, as far as possible, how their host families live. A trained interpreter is allocated to each participant. The three days are preceded by a day of orientation and followed by a day of reflection. The whole process, including travel time, should last no more than one week.

The detail of each immersion is shaped by participant interests and what the hosts propose. The emphasis on experiential learning also means that

participants' time is relatively unstructured. Some examples of daily activities might include helping the host family with their tasks both in and outside of the home, listening to life stories, visiting people or places of interest, and holding discussions with focus groups. Participants will be able to learn directly from those they meet, without this being filtered through intermediary organisations, and in so doing develop a more nuanced understanding of a specific community's needs, resources, views, and aspirations.





“ 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... I would strongly recommend this training to all DFID staff.”

Jane Jamieson, DFID China

What will ActionAid provide?

ActionAid can facilitate immersions in a range of contexts across the developing world. It has programmes in over forty countries, each of these working with partners to promote participatory, people-focused development. More specifically, immersions organised by ActionAid offer four things:

Experienced facilitation

ActionAid regards immersions as periods of experiential learning and therefore designs them using the principles of participatory learning. An experienced facilitator will accompany the group throughout.

Professional quality

ActionAid has been learning the lessons from past immersions, both its own and those organised by other organisations. It has also benefited in this respect from expertise within the UK's Institute of Development Studies. It will apply all of this knowledge in ways that ensure a high-quality experience for participants.

Local knowledge

An ActionAid-supported partner organisation with strong roots in the host community will guide the group and manage any local negotiations. The partner will be carefully selected according to their experience, reputation, and approach.

A holistic view of poverty

Specific policy areas can be explored in an immersion, particularly their local-level consequences. However, a rounded and holistic understanding of poverty will also be encouraged, reflecting ActionAid's and its partners' expertise.

On a more practical note, ActionAid will take responsibility for participants' welfare, interpreters, and security, for their travel to and from the village, and for providing essential equipment. Each participant will be asked to take responsibility for their own health and insurance and to assure ActionAid that they have done so.





We sit in Beijing, we talk, we discuss, and we analyse policy.

We try to assume what the implications are for poverty without actually experiencing what poverty is... This immersion has served as an important reality check, but also to reinvigorate my commitment to the mission, goals and values of DFID China.”

Rahul Malhotra, DFID China



For whom is an immersion most suitable?

Immersion will be most suitable for middle-to-senior level staff of governments and donors, whether working in a country office or headquarters. In most cases there will be a mix of participants in each group – some from donors, some from government, perhaps some from other institutions. The group will include an ActionAid staff member, as well as the local partner representative and facilitator.



How might host communities benefit?

ActionAid believes that direct, unmediated contact between communities and officials has a rare richness. Its experience has been that this is a two-way learning process. Hosts value the exchange with their guests while participants can draw on what they have learnt to increase the effectiveness of what they do. For donors and

governments this might mean better grounded policy dialogue; for NGOs, a better appreciation of dynamics such as exclusion and vulnerability.

The costs of accommodating visitors are reimbursed by ActionAid directly to each family in ways that are culturally appropriate.

What will it cost?

Immersion offers clear value for money. The charge made of each participant compares very favourably with an equivalent period of time spent in a standard

city-based workshop. It covers in-country travel and subsistence, expenses incurred by host families, facilitation and interpretation, and administration costs.

Please contact:

Sonya Ruparel
International Partnership
Development team, ActionAid.

sonya.ruparel@actionaid.org
Tel: +44 (0)20 7561 7653

ActionAid, Hamlyn House, Macdonald Road,
London N19 5PG, UK.

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All other picture credits: ActionAid

ActionAid International
PostNet Suite #248
Private Bag X31
Saxonwold 2132
Johannesburg, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0) 880 0008
Fax: +27 (0) 11 880 8082
Email: mail.jhb@actionaid.org
Website: www.actionaid.org

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ActionAid International is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.

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