1. The Immersion Experience - Background

Immersion at Twaweza is grounded in the belief that in order to make a meaningful contribution to the lived realities of East African citizens, we must, as an organization, do our very best to understand what these lived realities are like. And while reading, researching and so forth are great ways of expanding our knowledge, there is no better way to really learn and understand than to participate. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania our sense is that there are multiple and interlocking ways in which citizens at the local level act to solve problems (we are particularly interested in the education and governance sectors, but also wider public services). These may include private actions, but also public debate, perhaps negotiation with local authorities, perhaps expressing disgruntlement at time of election, perhaps lobbying one authority such as the religious leader to indirectly pressure another one, such as the school head teacher, and many more...

As Twaweza, we are in a privileged position in that we straddle both the policy and citizen space. Often we take great effort to get to know our policy partners, understand what drives them, how to best reach them. Immersion allows us to focus on the other, complementary space – that of ordinary citizens. We have always believed that people will find a way to get things done; for us to understand these processes and build upon them, we need to be “tuned in” – we need to listen and see how people are living, how they communicate and express their aspirations. That’s where the idea of the ‘immersion’ comes in. It is not a research exercise; it is a “deep dive” into one particular location. The purpose is not to engineer data, but to give us an insight into a slice of a reality very different from our own (yet which we aim to affect through our work). It is ultimately to challenge and inform our own thinking.

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1 For a published article on immersion, see: Rinus van Klinken (2012): Immersion for organisational learning in Tanzania, Development in Practice, 22:7, 921-931. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.696579](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.696579)
The approach we have used in our immersions involves staff from Twaweza and a partner organization spending a number of days with a previously identified host families, asking the families to provide a small ‘window’ for us into their lives. In our experience so far, families responded with great generosity, curiosity and dignity.

**2. Immersion Objectives & Theme**

Twaweza immersion has objectives at both individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, the core objective is to challenge our assumptions about how people organize their lives and how “development” approaches fit within that. At the organizational level, the core objective is to develop a set of reference points to guide, inform and enrich our work; and to enable us, as an organization, to scrutinize our theory of change.

Every year, the immersion has a general theme to it. In 2015, the theme is “how do citizens and authorities interact?” This stems from our new strategy, where the focus is on the spaces where citizens and authorities intersect (sometimes called public agency), particularly in basic education and governance. Within this, we also want to explore the presence (or absence) and the need (or not) for data related to basic services, in the spirit of open data / data revolution and similar recent trends in promoting accountability and improved governance practice.

1. What kind of authorities do the families come in contact with in the education domain?
2. What about in the governance domain?
3. Are there other authority figures that seem to be important, that are in neither domain? (e.g., religious leaders will almost invariably come here) And is there an overlap among them?
4. What can we observe and learn about these interactions: what is the nature / space / color of the interaction?
   a. E.g., the authority clearly has the upper hand and commands a lot of respect; is it a more equal-footing, sense of shared reality; the authorities are seen as disinterested “service providers”; what are the perceptions of whose interest is priority, and therefore the sense of accountability...
5. What kind of data (information) do we spontaneously see our families have access to, interact with frequently? And how is this information situated within networks and relationships?
   a. Consider all kinds of data/information that seems relevant to your host (e.g., from price of the milk they sell, to saving for the oldest child’s secondary fees, to pledges from campaigning MPs, etc.), and all kinds of sources of information (e.g., radio news, local meetings, informal talking with neighbors, etc.).
   b. In context of basic education and governance, what kind of information and data do families interact with? This could be as simple as a child’s school notebook: see if it’s marked by the teacher; see how the parents interact with it. But it is also more subtle: can you tell how tuned-in the adults in your family are to the children’s school progress? Can you tell how involved they are at the school and what does this mean for them? Can you tell how the family is involved in local networks and decision making? E.g., what groups do members belong to (church, savings, etc.), what role do they play in them, what gets discussed and what kind of decisions are taken?...

**3. 2015 Location**
We are going to Soroti and Kumi districts in Eastern Uganda. Some basic information obtained from website here: [http://www.ugandatravelguide.com/soroti-district.html](http://www.ugandatravelguide.com/soroti-district.html)

- Formerly known as Teso District, it existed at Independence in 1962 and consists of the present day Kaberamaido, Katakwi, Soroti and Kumi. To ease administration, Teso district was in the 1970s divided into North Teso and South Teso, which in 1980, became Soroti and Kumi District respectively. The district has over 371,986 inhabitants.
- MAIN LANGUAGES: Ateso, Kumam and Kiswahili.
- ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES: Agriculture with main emphasis on food crops such as millet, cassava, cow Pease, potatoes, beans, Simsim and sunflower. Cash crops cotton. Vegetables such as Tomatoes, Onions and cabbage.
- EDUCATION SERVICES: The district has a total of 173 primary schools with 153 government, 6 private and 14 community schools. For secondary schools, the district has over 39 schools, 8 are government, 14 private and 17 community. There are 3 technical institutions, 2 teacher training colleges.
- HEALTH SERVICES: The district has 3 Government dispensaries (II), 14 health centres (III) at county, 3 health centres (IV) at sub-district with 1 hospital. More so, it has 6 private/NGO dispensaries, 22 clinic, 1 health centre (III) and no hospital. There is a Regional Referral Hospital Soroti with 195 beds, Uganda Catholic Medical Bureau- Lwala Hospital with 135 beds.
- TRANSPORT NETWORK: The district has a network of Murram roads. The only tarmacked road runs through Kumi. The district has an airstrip where Soroti Aviation School is based. Soroti is served by a railway line which runs from Mbale to Lira. Presently the Rail line is dormant.

4. Immersion Methodology

In this field trip/immersion we are *defamiliarising* ourselves with what we currently know in order to see things differently. The concept of immersion means letting one’s preconceptions go and entering as far as possible into the life-worlds and perceptions of the host community. To do this, it is valuable to suspend ones’ judgments temporarily. This does not mean letting go of a focus for our learning. It is about ‘seeing’ and ‘listening’ without preconceptions. We keep our theories and our questions in the back of our minds while we are in the villages so that we keep ourselves open to surprise and things we might not have seen, had we had them foremost in our minds.

The key is to the extent possible just “hang out” with people. This means that is better not to ask many questions, as people may simply tell you what they think you want to know. Observing and listening are key, but below are other approaches you can try as well, in order of importance.

*Observing and listening*: This means simply watching what is going on, without intervening or changing the situation. Often it is by observing the small spontaneous interactions and social encounters that you suddenly gain insight into the ways in which people see things and what things mean to people. You might observe an interaction between a husband and wife, and suddenly understand something different about power. Or you might observe people listening to the radio and then discussing what they heard afterwards. Then you might overhear them referring to the issue the following day. Or you might observe an informal interaction between the village chairman and villagers, and suddenly understand something different about agency. In such interactions, it is useful to try to remember the setting that the interaction or event took place in, who else was present, what the activity was, what resources people were using to communicate or make things happen (objects, tools, technologies, language,
literacy. Remember even something like a pen and paper can be seen as a technology for producing literate communication, a phone is another.

In these examples you didn’t ask lots of questions or trigger the discussion: you watched and waited. Sometimes you might ask ‘why’? Later, or the next day, after thinking about what happened you might want to go back and ask people why they said or did something. Try and remember the exact words people used, afterwards you can write these words down in your notebook as quotes.

**Participating (and using trial and error):** In this approach, you observe and listen more actively by taking part physically in what people are doing. Play soccer with kids; listen to the radio with people. Work with people as they fish, and as they load the fish you may do something wrong and wait for them to correct you. Then they will explain to you why they do something in a particular way. Or you might be carrying firewood and you need to ask for advice on how to bundle the wood. You may want to bring out the newspaper you have bought and leave them lying around. See what people do with them and what they say about them.

With your hosts, go out to the fields, lake or pastures with family members, taking part in the daily chores, contributing to the work and taking part in the social life of the households. This may mean working in the field, fetching water or wood, washing or cooking.

It is perfectly okay to ask questions about the children’s school and also to gently request to go visit the school. It’s also perfectly okay to ask how the village is organized, who is the community leader, etc. More likely than not you will anyway be taken to meet them, or they will come by to check you out.

Again, try to observe – what are the tools, technologies, language that is being used; what can you tell about the relationships, power dynamics, trust. Afterwards you can write some notes in your notebook about these things.

**Talking:** In talking, it is important not to ask pre-planned questions, but to rather explore, asking a chain of questions or around a theme to learn about people’s lives. If you follow the ‘why’ question, you can get quite far towards deep cultural understandings. Without being rude, try not to accept what is said at face value, but ask for concrete examples of what the person is saying. You may also want to try to get some group discussions going, but don’t set these up specifically. Rather just to try to draw others in, and ask their opinions or views.

The key here is not so much the asking, but the listening and taking note of what is said and done, especially the words being used and the language in which the statements are being made. Try to remember direct quotes here, and then you can write them down later exactly as they were said. When you reflect afterwards, write notes in your notebook about differing opinions and how people expressed them. (But don’t take notes while talking with or listening to people.)

**Visual approaches:** Some of us will find it useful and appropriate to take photos, some of us will not want to. We are trying to enter into ‘insider’ perspectives of the villagers, and as far as possible not to display our own ‘otherness’. So use your own judgments but avoid carrying cameras out in the open. Don’t attempt to take photos before you and your hosts are familiar and comfortable with each other and your mission. Ask permission to take any photos of people, or even better: ask people which photos they would like you to take to show your colleagues. Taking pictures during conversations should be kept minimum and not interfere with the conversations and interactions (unless it is actively suggested by the hosts themselves).
**Some things to avoid:**
1. Giving children money or inappropriate gifts
2. Taking photos without consent
3. Being glued to your mobile phone. It’s fine to check-in with your loved ones to let them know all is well, but do it discreetly. Avoid spending time on your phone – talking, texting, whatsapping, emailing, etc. Doing these things really disconnects you from the family and surroundings, beating the point of going on immersion on the first place.

5. **Program outline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrive Entebbe airport</td>
<td>24 May</td>
<td>Around 1.30pm from TZ, similar time for KE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depart to Soroti (from airport, and office), organized coach, via Kampala to pick up UG staff</td>
<td>24 May</td>
<td>Around 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briefing session in Soroti, staying at a hotel in Soroti 1 night</td>
<td>24 May</td>
<td>5-8pm (including dinner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check out, depart to host communities via local transportation</td>
<td>25 May</td>
<td>8-9am (after breakfast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time with host families; sleep 3 nights</td>
<td>25-26-27 May</td>
<td>All day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to Soroti via local transportation, to same hotel in Soroti</td>
<td>28 May</td>
<td>Plan to arrive in Soroti by lunchtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-brief session (1 night at hotel)</td>
<td>28-29 May</td>
<td>Through lunch on 29th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depart to Kampala / Entebbe, organized coach</td>
<td>29 May</td>
<td>Around 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KE colleagues to airport, depart home</td>
<td>29 May</td>
<td>Evening flights (around 10pm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TZ colleagues 1 night in EBB, depart next early morning to Dar</td>
<td>30 May</td>
<td>5am flight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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6. **Practical Information for Participants**

Twaweza organizes the logistics for all participants, including flights for all participating staff, and the booking of a central venue from which we depart (and where we gather again at the end).

We usually hold a briefing session before the immersion begins (the evening before), where participants find out which family they will be staying with, their name, telephone number and some basic information, as well as directions on how to reach that household. We also talk about do’s and don’ts, and generally try to allay anxiety that some participants may have.

A typical Twaweza immersion is 3 nights “in the field”; on the fourth morning we bid goodbye to the families and return to the central location where we started from. There, we hold a 1-day debrief session. This is a critical component of the immersion: the sharing of stories, laughing, downloading all the impressions – it could hardly be richer! In addition to the sharing, the debrief is organized into sessions (tailored each year to the theme and the group) which help us reflect on the lived experience, and to use it as a new lens on our work. Have we gotten some of our core assumptions wrong, or right, and to what degree? What are the nuances we have missed? What new have we learned that is meaningful for our work?
Twaweza will furnish each participant with some core materials; others the participants ought to bring themselves.
**Twaweza will provide:**

1. Sleeping bag and mat (mat to be left with host family)
2. Mosquito net and string (to be left with host family)
3. Solar lamps (to be left with family)
4. First aid kits (one per pair)
5. Water bottle and water guard/treatment
6. Insect repellent
7. Gift for the mother of the house (lesso) and for children (ball)
8. Token gift of money to be left with host family
9. Notebook and pen

**Participants to bring:**

1. Torch, match box
2. Personal toiletries (soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, tissues etc) + any medication you may need
3. Comfortable, appropriate clothes including Khanga/Kitenge for women
4. Good walking shoes
5. A warm sweater, consider a rain jacket
6. Plastic bags (both for protecting important items against rain and for personal waste disposal)
7. Camera
8. Toilet paper
9. Sun screen
10. Plastic sandals / flip flops (for bathing and washing)
11. A small mirror
12. Newspapers to read and share

**What not to bring**

1. Valuables that are not essential for your stay
   - Note that some of us will bring laptops for the briefing and de-briefing sessions. We will leave those at the hotel in Soroti. You may choose to do the same, though we can’t guarantee the safety of your personal items left with the hotel.
2. Expensive jewelry, heavy makeup and perfume
3. Inappropriate clothes (showing knees and shoulders, both for women and men)
4. Taking special foods or drinks into the house of your hosts