

Tool 17: Context Immersions

Aim of the tool

To immerse in stakeholders' work or daily routines, in order to have an in depth examination of their perspectives and experiences. This provides new insights and informal intuition.

When to use it?

Shared language phase - to build understanding of the realities of particular stakeholder groups.

What are Context Immersions?

Context Immersion is about meeting people, immersing yourself in the context where they live, work and socialize. It is a method to engage with beneficiaries or clients. Ideally, these stakeholder groups should be part of your discussions, but in reality this is often not feasible. Immersions offer the possibility to interact and learn from the people who are often being discussed rather than part of the conversation. Think about small-scale farmers or slum dwellers, for example.

Immersion is not the same as a field visit or an exposure trip. They usually include overnights, and they are facilitated to ensure that the exchange is appropriate and delivers value for all parties involved. It provides an opportunity to engage with parties at a deeper level and offers new insights based on tacit, rather than formal, explicit and codified knowledge. The focus is on increasing empathy – as opposed to pity.

Context immersion is, for example, very useful for development workers working on and writing about poverty eradication. The World Bank and DFID are both examples of organizations who have run such immersion programs. According to a participant from a DFID immersion program, the technique helped to create “the ability to put into words the perception of poorer people and more ability to empathize with their perspective”. (R. Irvine, R. Chambers, and R. Eyben, 2004).

Context immersions can serve as valuable ‘reality checks’ from the usual work routines of meetings, paperwork and spreadsheets. This may well change the attitudes of those with policy making power, and can be considered as a strategy to trigger change (R. Krznaric, 2007).

Context Immersions - Step by step

Step 1: To plan a homestay, identify people willing to host a researcher (or MSP core team member) for one-to-three nights in their home. Depending on local customs, level of safety, and language barriers, team members can stay in homes individually or partner up in groups of two to three people.

If it is not feasible to stay overnight, a field visit is a second option. A field visit will give great spin-off effects with regard to team building and learning. However, if possible, staying overnight is highly recommended. It will provide empathy and insights in realistic solutions.

Step 2: Make sure the team understands that the goal of this exercise is to see how participants live in a day-to-day basis. Advise your team not to bring elaborated gifts, food, or alcohol to the homestay. However, a small gift, such as ordinary household supplies or help with normal family expenses is perfectly fine.

Step 3: Tell the team members to participate with the family in their normal routines. Ask the team to spend time with them, and talk to the men, women, and children in the household. It's important to see how the household works from all these different perspectives.



Photo: www.business.illinois.edu/subsistence/teaching/immersion.html, retrieved 12-5-2015

Good to know:

Context immersion can happen in either a family homestay or by working alongside a person or group of persons.

Through a context immersion you may get clarity on the discrepancy between what people say and what they actually do. It enables you to get a hinge of what people think and feel instead of limiting your knowledge on what they say. This will provide you with 'Informed Intuition' to be used as input when designing solutions and new plans. It also shows commitment and builds trust between stakeholders.

Learn more

Human Centered Design- Toolkit – 2nd edition

http://www.ideo.com/images/uploads/hcd_toolkit/IDEO_HCD_ToolKit.pdf

Roman Krznaric (2007). How change happens- Interdisciplinary perspectives for Human Development Oxfam Research Report <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/how-change-happens-interdisciplinary-perspectives-for-human-development-112539>

Renwick Irvine, Robert Chambers, and Rosalind Eyben (2004) Learning From Poor People's Experience: Immersions, Lessons for Change Series No. 13, University of Sussex: IDS: 6–10. www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0903/IMMERSIONS2.pdf

ActionAid offers facilitated immersions:

www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/content_document/immersions_brochure.pdf

Blog entry by Owen Barder, development economist, on context immersion:

www.owen.org/blog/3320