

A top-down view of a meal laid out on a woven bamboo mat. The meal includes a large bowl of yellow rice, a bowl of dark beans, a bowl of green leafy vegetables, a bowl of meat in a dark sauce, and a large flatbread. A hand is visible on the left side of the frame, holding a small bowl of rice. The text "Twaweza Staff Immersion" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Twaweza Staff Immersion

**EASTERN UGANDA
MAY 2015**

Immersion at Twaweza

- There is no better way to learn and understand than to participate.
- As Twaweza, we straddle both the policy and citizen space. Immersion allows us to focus on the lived realities of ordinary citizens.
- In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania there are multiple and interlocking ways in which citizens at the local level act to solve problems
- We want to be “tuned in” — to listen and see how people communicate, express their aspirations, get things done. That’s where the idea of the immersion comes in.
- Immersion is not a research exercise; it is a “deep dive” into one particular location. The purpose is not to generate hard data, but to give us an insight into a slice of a reality which we aim to affect through our work. It is ultimately to challenge and inform our own thinking.



How we do it?

Twaweza Staff and a partner organization spend a number of days with pre- identified host families in one of the countries where we work.

- We approach a selection of non-urban families and ask them to host (a pair of) us for 4 days and 3 nights
- We brief the families on the purpose (to participate in their daily life, to learn what things are important in their context; we emphasize that we're not bringing any particular project or funding)
- Families are not paid to host us, however
 - We offer the households to keep some of the amenities we bring with us, such as mosquito nets, solar lamps, and water treatment tablets
 - We offer a token small payment at the end of our stay, to defray costs



In 2015: Where and who?

- Eastern Uganda: Soroti, Kumi and Serere districts
- 25 host families were identified and briefed by our Uwezo district coordinators who are familiar with the area and personally know many of the families.
- In total, we were 50 participants (48 staff members plus 2 independent writers from Uganda)



Our methodology

- In immersion we are *defamiliarising* ourselves with what we currently know in order to see things differently. We try to let go of our preconceptions, and allow events to unfold and topics to emerge.
- At the same time, we set an overarching theme for us – a broad question which will, quietly, guide some of our observations and which will, afterwards, help us to reflect meaningfully on our organizational practices.
- 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 unexpected events, new and different conversations.
- The key is, to the extent possible, just go with the flow.



Our methodology in more detail

METHOD	HOW TO DO IT
Observing and listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The art of saying nothing: simply watching what is going on, without intervening or changing the situation.- Observing small spontaneous interactions and social encounters tells volumes about relationships, structures, etc.
Participating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- One observes and listens more actively by taking part physically in what people are doing. Immersion participants typically play soccer with kids, listen to the radio with others, help with house chores, lend a hand on the farm, help fetch water, etc.
Talking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 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- One of the best ways is to (gently) keep asking "why"?
Visual approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Most common is taking photos. Always ask for permission to take photos; avoid photography on the first day, before you and your hosts are familiar and comfortable with each other and your mission.
Journaling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- In a quiet moment, write down observations, conversations; describe how you feel and interact, what you are experiencing. Use free flow; this is not a report, it's your personal journal.- Do not "interview" people – i.e., do not pull out notebooks and scribble while you talk. Just be part of the conversation, and reflect later.

The theme and core questions

- In 2015, the overarching theme was “**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.
- Core Questions:
 - What kind of authorities do the families come in contact within the Education and Governance domain?
 - Are there other authority figures that seem to be important, that are in neither domain? And is there an overlap among them?
 - What can we observe and learn about these interactions: What is the nature / space / power dynamic of the interaction?

What staff expected before the immersion...

This trip to me is about understanding the citizens and what they go through in their daily lives. This helps us as an organisation **(Tanzania)**

I'm interested in learning and getting to know how people live, what people are thinking about and what is going on in the country. **(Uganda)**

This is part of our experiential learning. It is a big learning event for us as an organisation, it will be very important in informing the surveys and work that we do. I know that I will return from this immersion refreshed and bubbling with new ideas. **(Uganda)**

I want to learn from the community, but also have fun. **(Tanzania)**

This is my first immersion and I expect to learn a lot from the citizens' life. I want to know if their life matches with the data we always collect and disseminate. **(Uganda)**

When you are in office most of the time, you never know what is going on and miss out on some of this real life. I want to know what's going on. **(Kenya)**

I need to know how these communities overcome their challenges, even when they do have limited resources. I will put much of my focus on the way they handle education related issues in their communities. **(Tanzania)**

I'm ready to learn from the communities... but I need to admit that I'm also scared, this being my first immersion. I will be staying in a home with people that I do not know, for the very first time. **(Uganda)**

It is going to be real adventure for me, to see how people do things differently from the way I have always known. **(Kenya)**



What did we experience and observe in the host communities?

Education Observations



Parents:

- Parents do pay attention to paying school fees
- Parents play their role by enrolling children
- Parents support disadvantaged children
- Some parents do not value education, as there is a lack of understanding among parents on existing education policies
- Some parents are detached with learning of their children
- Inequality in education: scholarships are available only for few
- Overpopulated schools: Increase in private schools
- There's a hazy connection between going to school and learning
- Parents give little support to children in their homework
- Lack of role models: Teachers do not generate new knowledge, teaching is not participatory

Authorities:

- Government are responding to education by increasing capitation grants
- Local chairpersons (LC1s) are monitoring education
- Sponsors of schools are involved in school management
- RDCs represent the president in education. They are active and do engage
- Citizen parliament are able to question funds usage in schools
- There's a hands-off approach to learning left to the government
- Local government is detached from education delivery
- There's poor infrastructure
- There's a gap between central and local government
- Concentration is on inputs more than outputs
- School committee members not thoroughly vetted



Governance Observations

There seems to be no government control in this area. There is no citizenry-government engagement in this area.

(This) village has no working local council system and there are no secondary schools around.

Citizens depend on LC1 to solve matters/issues

LC1s providing support towards Children's learning

There is a sense that people in this part of the country are marginalized

(This) village has no working local council system and there are no secondary schools around.

Citizens do not like talking about the Government

There is usage of posters, word of mouth and radios for communication in (this) village. Sub-county chiefs display government money on notice boards in this community.

Corruption is everywhere e.g people pay bribes to get things done

Church has authority in school management e.g. Schools led by Catholic church

Local Chairman 1 (LC1) in every community is responsible for Community action/decisions

Citizen's parliament discuss community and social issues

Political loyalties are very diverse – from strong support of current regime, to strong opposition

A few citizens do take active leadership roles

How does this myriad of observations influence our work?



- We asked two basic questions in terms of what do these experiences and observations mean for (1) our theory, and (2) our implementation and practice

Insights on Education

- **Insights for our theorizing:**

- Our theory seems to assume the existence of a democratic space that would allow free parental participation in public education matters. In Eastern Uganda, we did not see this space...
- Instead, we saw an increased engagement with private education, even among very poor parents. This is the classic “exit” approach. However, sending children to private schools didn’t appear to necessarily correlate with other support to learning – such as meeting with teachers more frequently, or checking homework.
- Parents overall seem to not know how to engage with teachers and head teachers; for those who pay private school fees, there is a sense that the payment literally buys quality – but this often isn’t the case in reality

- **Insights for our implementation:**

- We observed that faith based organizations and leaders wield significant influence over education matters: have we accounted for this influence in our plans?
- Uwezo assessments could include private schools in the research
- Radio rules as the means of communication: we need to use it more, and better

Insights on Governance

- **Insights for our theorizing:**

- Many individual citizens expressed resignation or even submissiveness towards authorities; these individuals tended to be dis-engaged, perhaps apathetic. When they were active, they chose the exit strategy.
- The pro-active citizens, which were fewer, can take the path of pressuring the authorities into action, though more often, the path taken is the one to bribe authorities into action
- Overall sentiment from citizens is that they are largely dissatisfied with local authorities, although there were notable exceptions:
 - In some settings, citizen's parliaments were very active
 - Local councilors (LCs; elected, not appointed) were also often trusted and respected. In fact, while they are on the lowest rung of the hierarchy, they seem to represent a vibrant bridge between citizens and authorities

- **Insights for our implementation:**

- Perhaps most significant realization was the bridge function of the LC's: here was a demonstration of how citizens and authorities can positively interact. How can Twaweza build on this, amplify it?

Insights on peddling of information

- **Insights for our theorizing:**

- Information asymmetries truly exist: citizens understand how the system works in reality, but have little knowledge of accountability requirements, as well as their own rights to act on those.
- That said, we encountered a number of “civic educators” – volunteers from the villages who have been trained by local civil society organizations on range of topics (from elections, to gender-based violence, to rights under custody). They hold impromptu meetings in trading posts and market places, spreading this information.
- Local opinion leaders have great power to generate debate and uptake of information: get them on the side of the topic you want, and it will surely be discussed and heard.

- **Insights for our implementation:**

- At the local level, village meetings (structured and organized, as well as improvised) are effective, if labor-consuming, means of getting information across. The human connection matters: the messenger is known, thus the message can be trusted. (Not to say there is always agreement – quite the contrary, we witnessed healthy debates)
- In terms of mass media, radio is by far the most prominent.
- There is a dearth of printed information. Does this present an opportunity, if coupled with meaningful interaction?

Insights on other topics that influence our work

- Do we know what a “responsive authority” looks like?
 - Are there standards, definitions developed already that we can apply, test and adapt to our settings in East Africa?
- Gender roles, stereotypes, and dynamics permeated our observations.
 - Do we continue to maintain a “gender-neutral” stance in our discourse (are we being gender-blind, perhaps?), and if not, how to address it meaningfully without crudely applying the gender lens onto all our work?
- We observed that the issue of livelihood, particularly for young people, was overwhelmingly important.
 - We have chosen to focus on education and governance sectors; is there a more explicit link to explore between these two sectors and economic livelihood questions?

In summary...

We are left with questions, insights, experiences; not black-and-white answers.

But that's what immersion is about.



How will we know whether this immersion has been meaningful for the organization?

- We conduct an internal evaluation and ask staff about the exercise: what worked and what didn't, and how to change it next time
- Formally, we publicize our experiences and thoughts in blogs and articles, inviting further dialogue on the value of this exercise as part of being a "learning organization"
- We revisit the key messages that emerged in formal moments: our mid-year review and our strategic reflection and planning for the following year; they are usually a good reality check on our ambitious plans
- Although in our experience, it's the individual moments, insights, small discoveries each one of us carries forward that are the biggest gain to the organization: we are a group of people who value taking time out, experiencing, questioning. This is what ultimately makes us better at our work.

So looks like we'll be going on immersion again in 2016... and keep learning...