TWAWEZA IMMERSION 2016:
Looking for Public Agency

What is Immersion at Twaweza?

It's an annual, organization-wide exercise, which requires everyone (from the receptionist to the program officer to the executive director) to leave behind our desks, computers and capital cities, and join, for a few days, the lived reality of citizens in the countries where we work.

We pack as lightly as possible: low on assumptions, few pre-formed ideas. Instead, lots of space for new experiences, observations, encounters. After all, we believe there is no better way to learn and understand than to participate.

It's our attempt to be "tuned in"— to listen and see how people communicate, express their aspirations, get things done. Immersion is (normally) not a research exercise; it is a "deep dive" into one particular location. The purpose is 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.

What is Public Agency?

- At Twaweza, we define public agency as the space where citizens and authorities intersect and interact on issues of importance to them. Often, but not always, these issues are centered around basic services, such as education or health. The interactions may shift between from collaborative to confrontational (and everything in between). The crux is that there is a shared space, because we believe that ultimately, the path to development is shaped by the social contract between citizens and state.

- Fostering public agency for Twaweza means galvanizing civil society and citizens to pro-actively reach out to and interface with officials, and, in turn, prodding and supporting officialdom to respond and engage.

- In 2016 we are exploring how to catalyze public agency at the subnational level, with the education system as an entry point. This pilot also addresses open government, in that it seeks to increase citizen participation in governance processes (related to education), as well as local authorities' transparency and accountability practices (in the education sector).

Looking for Public Agency

- So we find ourselves in early 2016 with a new idea to explore (public agency) and the perfect mechanism (immersion) to get us out across the countries where we work, to put the idea to the test in the real world.

- It made imminent sense to combine the two, even though it also meant changing some aspects of how we normally do immersion.

IMMERSION 2016:
something old, something new

What remained the same?

- Nearly all Twaweza staff across Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya visited mostly rural communities to engage in meaningful conversations with local officials, civil servants, and citizens.
- We were able to "deep dive" into different communities, to understand how people experience the relationship with local officials, particularly in the education sector. We visited schools and talked with head teachers, teachers and parents; we visited ward and district education officers; we also discussed the ideas with our district partners and their volunteers.
- We conducted the exercises simultaneously for all staff, took time to reflect and ruminate on the experience within each country, and then also pooled our findings and suggestions to shape the way forward in our work.

What changed?

- We identified key respondents, including government officials, ahead of time, and asked our district partners to set up appointments (particularly important for accessing officials)
- We designed a set of materials that each team took, including a brief presentation and explanation of public agency, and key themes to explore with our partner organizations as well as the various respondents.
- We did not stay with families, primarily for ease of keeping various appointments at schools, with a range of officials, our implementing partners, etc.
- We conducted visits within countries (previous immersions pooled all staff across the 3 countries)

Overall themes explored during immersion

With our local implementing partners, we wanted to explore whether the concept of public agency, as we had defined it, resonated with their understanding and lived realities. Were there examples of public agency already, and what did those look like? Was our partner interested in working on the pilot with us?

With local authorities (ward, district officers), we wanted to explore what is the interaction up and down the layers of officialdom (from districts to wards, wards to schools), and also further out, to the communities. How are priorities about education set? And are decisions informed by data, and what data, and how is it generated?

With schools & school communities (teachers, head teachers, school management committees, village leaders), we wanted to explore their perspective of official relationships with the school and education officials, ways of communication, the space allotted to different actors. How do parents interact with the school staff, and how do they perceive each other, in the quest to ensure quality education for their children?

IMMERSION 2016:
How did we organize it?

- We selected six districts (2 per country) for the initial scoping mission and 30 districts (10 per country) for the immersion fieldwork. In Kenya, following administrative structures, we chose counties. We chose the districts/counties purposefully, based on the strength of our Uwezo partner (those with high capacity during the Uwezo assessment implementation), an internal assessment that the partner organization might be a good fit in the public agency engagement, and a variation across Uwezo learning outcomes (i.e. a mix of low-performing and high-performing districts).

- The initial scoping mission allowed us to test the waters of the public agency concept with our partners and selected officials very early on. Based on the insights gathered, we decided to proceed with merging deeper fieldwork for public agency with the immersion. We also developed better tools to facilitate the fieldwork in the districts visited by all staff.
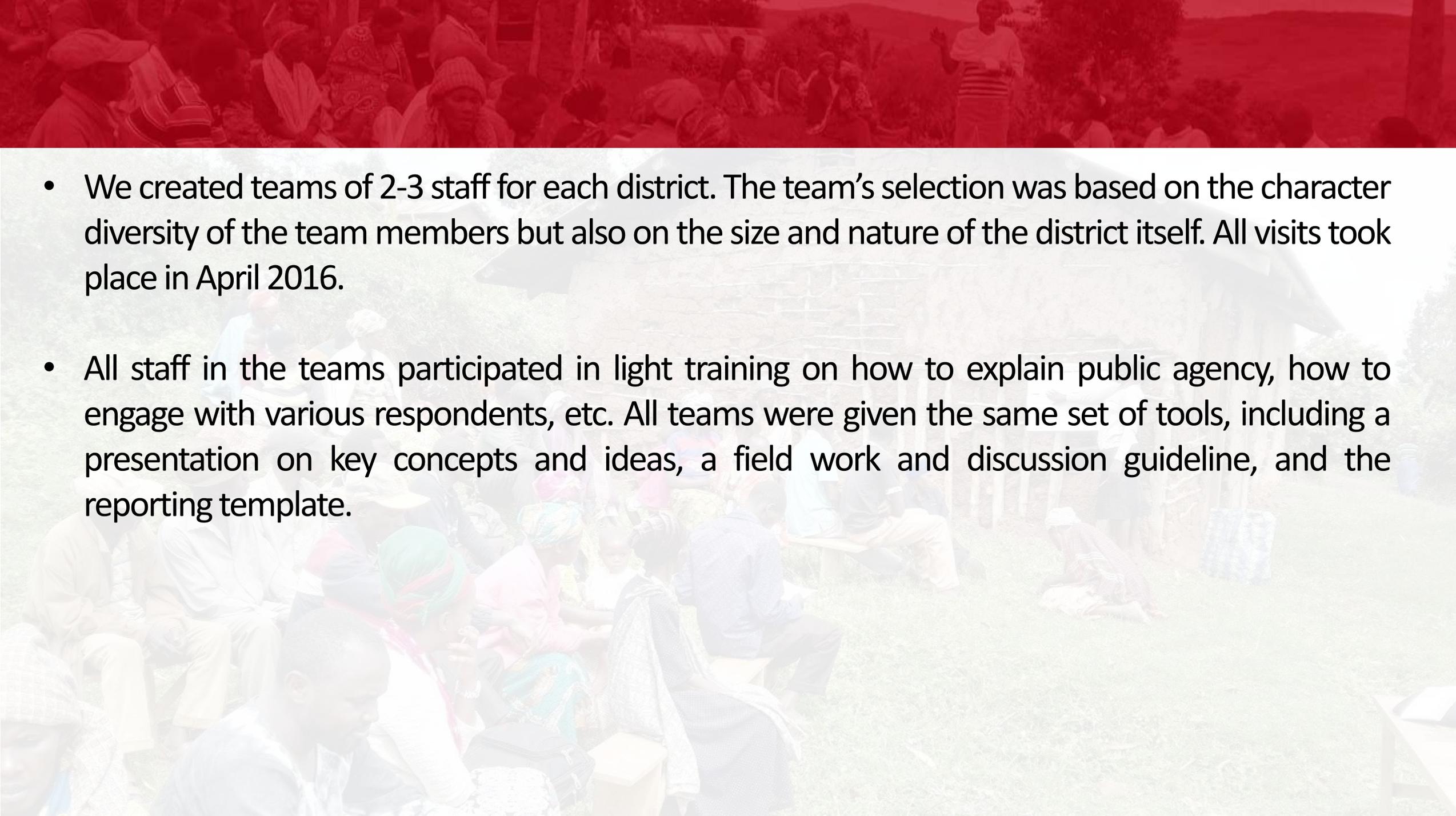
- We created teams of 2-3 staff for each district. The team's selection was based on the character diversity of the team members but also on the size and nature of the district itself. All visits took place in April 2016.

- All staff in the teams participated in light training on how to explain public agency, how to engage with various respondents, etc. All teams were given the same set of tools, including a presentation on key concepts and ideas, a field work and discussion guideline, and the reporting template.

Where in Tanzania
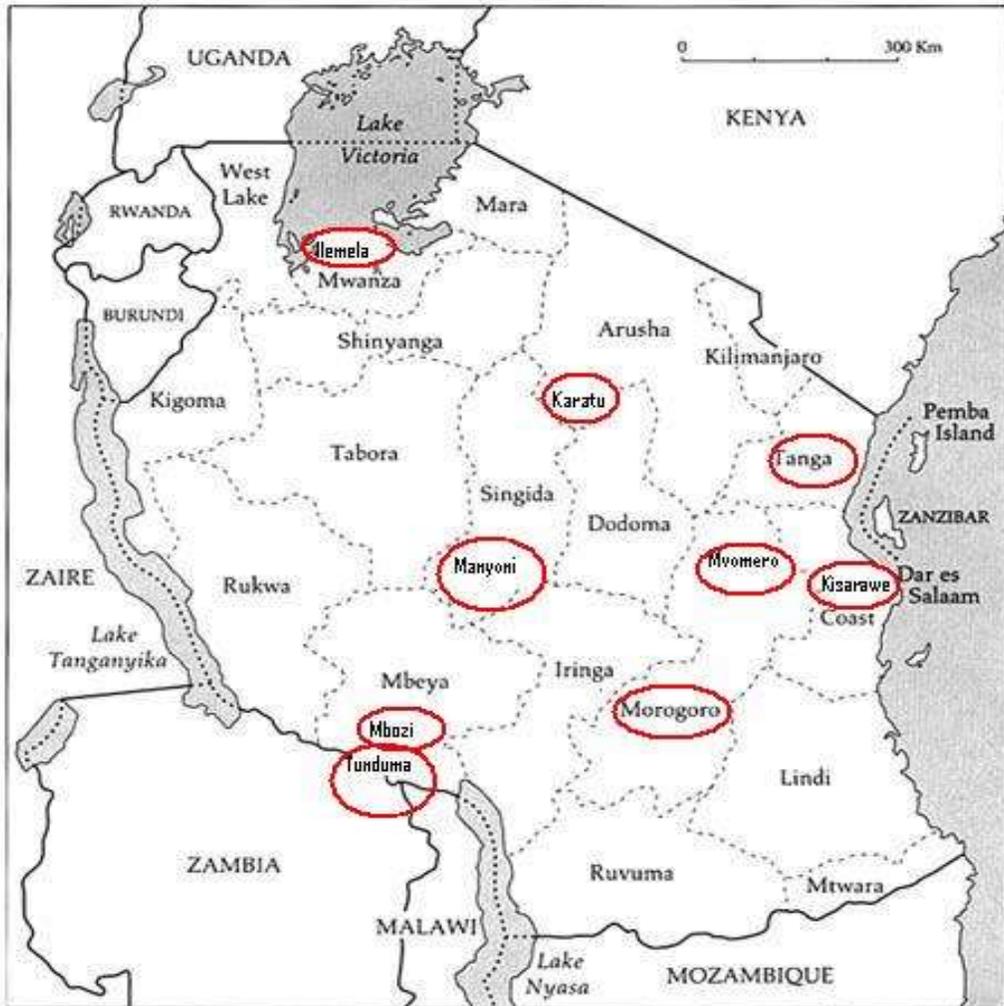
- Eight (8) districts were visited: Ilemela, Tanga, Manyoni, Mvomero, Kisarawe, Morogoro, Mbozi and Tunduma (as seen in the map). Karatu was in the plan, but logistical difficulties prevented the visit.

- A total of 22 staff out of 28 staff in Tanzania office participated in the public agency fieldwork.

Where in Uganda

Buikwe

- Ten (10) districts were visited: Moyo, Buikwe, Kaabong, Luwero and Soroti, Pader, Kibaale, Moroto, Namutumba and Kabaale.

- All the 14 members of staff in Uganda office participated in the public agency fieldwork.

Where in Kenya

Counties of Kenya

GeoCurrents Map
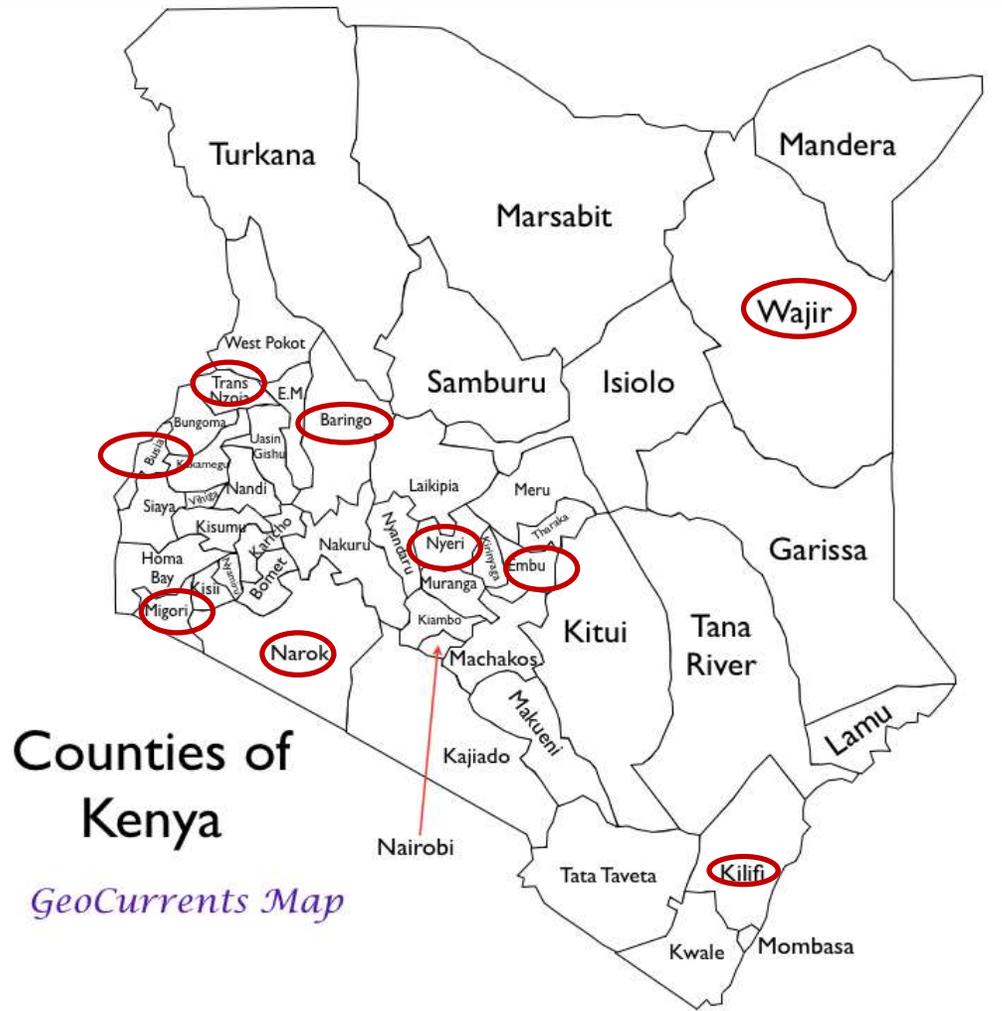
- Ten (10) Counties were visited: Busia, Baringo, Trans Nzoia, Migori, Embu, Nyeri, Narok, Nairobi, Wajir and Kilifi.

- A total of 17 staff out of 18 staff in Kenya office participated in the public agency fieldwork.

The methodology

- We used semi-structured discussion and interview methods. We had prepared tools with the themes / topics to cover with each type of stakeholder, but we did not prescribe detailed questions. We were interested in having conversations, not administering a survey.

- We preceded the discussion with a presentation on our thinking on public agency.

- We took lots of notes and also, where allowed, pictures.

- We used a standard reporting format across all teams, to structure the feedback according to major themes/topics. We also allowed ample room for adding of themes that were not part of the original list, but emerged as important.

IMMERSION 2016:
What we explored with district officials

At the district/county education office:

a) What data is available on core education statistics? Does the DEO/CDE use data in decision making? Can an example be given?

b) Does the DEO/CDE think there is other/different data that would be useful in decision making? What might that be?

c) How do the officials in the district office communicate with schools, receive data from schools?

d) What are the challenges facing education in the area and what is considered priority?

e) Do civil society or individual citizens participate in any of the district-level processes (planning, budgeting, etc.), and what is the official's opinion on this?

f) Check if any data is posted publicly at the District office.

At the district/county statistics office:

a) What data are available upon request on the last approved education budget, last education expenditure figures, enrolment figures and examination results for the last school year. Ask for copies of the data.

b) Who comes to ask for the data? Is it normally given? How is it used? Does the DEO/CDE request data? Do any CSOs ask for it? Any private citizens?

c) Check if any data is posted publicly.

What we explored with ward education officers

With ward education officers/ward administrators:

a) How do they see the status and situation of schools and education in their ward?

b) What is their role in supporting schools; do they have a say in any resource allocation; what role do they occupy between schools and districts?

c) How is the relationship between ward education officers and schools characterized?

d) Ask to see any records of last meeting with a school or a district education officer

IMMERSION 2016:

What we explored at schools

With the head teachers and teachers in schools:

a) How is the school doing overall – pass rates, number of children, classrooms, teachers, etc.?

b) What is the relationship with the ward and district officers in setting priorities, getting support for the school?

c) Capitation grant: how much received so far, is there variation between months, did school follow up to inquire on variation?

d) What is the state of parental involvement in this school, how does the school management committee function, how much support given by parents, how does the school involve parents?

e) See what information is publicly available/visible at the school (capitation grant, budget, expenditure, etc.)

With the school management committee of the school, including parents:

a) How do the members see status of education in their communities; the status of the school?
b) Explore how often the committee meets, what the discussions are like, what is the relationship between the committee and the head teacher?
c) Can we get a sense of whether it's an active, open space for participation and debate?
d) Ask to see the minutes of the last meeting

What we explored with community leaders

With village/local leaders of the communities where the schools are located

a) How do they see status of education in their communities; the status of the schools?

b) What is their role in deciding priorities for the community, including education? What is the process – are formal meetings called and how often, are minutes kept? Can you see a copy of the last minutes?

c) How involved are the local leaders with schools in particular? How do they see the role of the head teacher? Role of parents?

What we explored with our district partners

With the district-based organizations that have partnered with us previously for the Uwezo assessments

a) How does the idea of a public agency pilot resonate in their context, with their work? Does there seem to be alignment with the partner's own core work, with their theory of change?

b) How well networked is the partner with the district authorities, with other civil society in the district, with the schools and communities? Is the partner well positioned to engage in a meaningful and sustained manner with the different actors?

c) What will be the challenges in implementing such a pilot, from logistical to content to engagement? How could these challenges be addressed?

IMMERSION 2016:
What we learned and observed: a summary

Is there public agency already?

Currently, is there public agency already going on in addressing education? What does it look like?

- There is limited to no interaction between citizens (i.e. parents) and officials higher in the system – either at ward, or district/county level in the three countries. An exception are forums such as "education days" (or "literacy days" across the 3 countries), normally organized at the district/county level, in which citizens and authorities meet. However, the forums are mostly organized as celebrations, and are not used as a platform for dialogue in addressing issues in education.

- On the other hand, the very local space – that of the village/community meetings – seemed to embody the potential for public agency, as issues are openly discussed, and solutions sought. However, often the solutions end at "submitting requests or recommendations" higher up the chain, thereby stifling local action.

Is there public agency already?

- That noted, there were numerous examples of citizens taking action against officials (e.g. removal of severely negligent teachers), when they had had enough.
- Still, in majority of cases, the school administrators are quite powerful vis-à-vis parents and community members (although the rhetoric in some places was of "communities owning the schools" – but we didn't see much evidence of that being the real case). There didn't appear to be much public agency in the sense of communities and officials coming together to constructively solve problems in education.

What is the role of information?

What information is available, what is desired, and what kind of currency is it?

- Considerable amounts of administrative data are available at the district/county level; it gets funneled up the system from schools to wards to district to national offices.
- This data can be available through "appropriate" channels – i.e., a formal letter of request to be authorized by District Executive Director, or the District Education Officers.
- Few entities outside government request this kind of data, and all are NGOs / CSOs. In all three countries, there was little or no evidence that the public knows what information exists and where, let alone actively seeking it.
- This administrative data is the main (only) data source in the district; there is little awareness about the possibility of having independent data. Concurrently, there is very limited expressed desire or interest for additional information from nearly all official stakeholders

Is there public agency already?

- Public officers tend to be selective in exposing data. At the district/county levels, certain types of the data are posted publicly, e.g. exam results, lists of schools, and similar. At schools, guidelines from Ministries on financial data are often displayed, and sometimes the amounts received by the school as well (particularly in Tanzania). However, data on expenditures was conspicuously absent from both district and school public spaces.
- We saw little to no evidence of local media accessing or using the data in any way, or any evidence of the district offices making use of the local media to communicate to schools and communities.

Is there engagement potential from the local education sector, and local politicians?

How do local public education sector, and elected, leaders react to the idea of public agency in education?

- All technocrats are deeply immersed in the state bureaucracy, which is for the most part self-fulfilling and extractive. In other words, it extracts and values information which preserves the bureaucracy. Incentive to change is unclear. Top-down directives do results in change, but it's very unclear if bottom-up demand would do the same.
- Education officials' reactions when asked directly whether they would be open to citizens (parents) attending some of the official deliberations pertaining to education ranged from mild disbelief at the idea, to downright opposition to it.
- Districts are largely disconnected from schools, mostly obtaining required information through ward officers and paperwork. That said, there are also exceptions and some officials visit schools personally.
- Local elected leaders, on the other hand, have more appetite for carving their space vis-à-vis the central government; likely this is correlated with their political affiliation.

Is there engagement potential from the local education sector, and local politicians?

- The ward-level elected leaders are potentially an interesting group to focus on, although their incentives are political. Therefore some are very eager to engage, think through issues of education in their ward, others very hesitant and reluctant, particularly to engage citizens.
- In fact politics are ever present as thick, interwoven ropes that tie actors together (or keep them apart) in not always obvious ways. Some of it is party politics, some of it is personalities, some of it is power plays and vested interests. Reality, in other words, is rather messy, but ignoring it means playing in a fantasy world.

How motivated are our district partners?

What was the sense of the district partner, their motivation and capacity for public agency work within education?

- Partners are well connected to the district authorities, they seem to know and have a good relationship with ward and school actors
- They are also well networked with other NGOs and other civil society in the district (though there is the sense of competition for the same resources)
- Many of the partner organizations have considerable experience in community engagement activities, however, few if any had worked in bringing authorities and citizens together for constructive dialogue. Authorities are mostly contacted and engaged for permits, while citizens are mostly engaged to carry out the project at hand.

How motivated are our district partners?

- Most partners are relatively small organizations that, in order to survive, usually take up contracts from a variety of larger organizations or donors, so their work spans from health to education to environment to gender issues and more. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as lack of independent focus. On the other hand, these are astute organizations which learn to respond to the market and survive well in a pool of limited resources, and which through a variety of projects also accumulate a vast experience in how to work with different actors, how to use a variety of tools, and how to get things done.

- In sum, we found these organizations to be capable; we are not sure of their motivation for public agency per se (as opposed to it being just another project) – but in a sense, that is the challenge for us: is this idea captivating, does it build on existing energies, can it galvanize beyond just what the purse offers? …
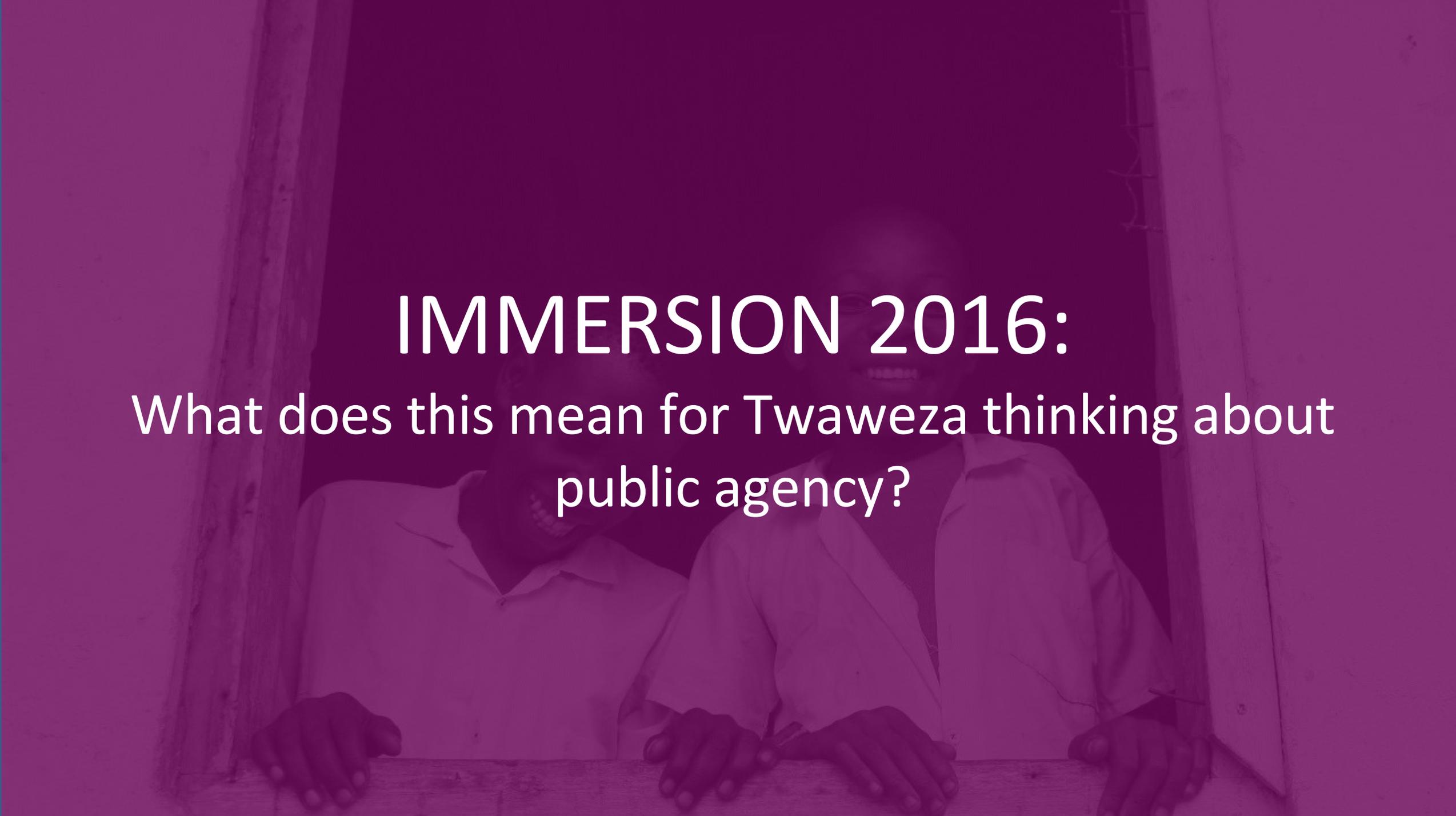
Puzzling, connecting the dots...

So we thought hard about the immersion experiences and what we learned about how education is "produced and managed," who has a say, and whether there is a space where citizens and officials already interact, or could interact, to jointly address education problems.

And we also read through and puzzled over considerable international research and evidence of the different types of initiatives in the participation and accountability space.

Puzzling, connecting the dots…

The crux of the debate focused on two main approaches. If we want to galvanize civil society and citizens to pro-actively reach out to and collaborate with officials, and, in turn, we expect officialdom to respond and engage: should Twaweza **go in at the grassroots, mobilize collective action?**
There is evidence this approach works.
But there are serious downsides: high-intensity, very localized work; limited evidence that the change achieved at the micro-level has transformative effect upwards or outwards.

Puzzling, connecting the dots…

Or, should Twaweza **go into the system, looking for opportunities and incentives within it?**

There is also evidence that this approach works.

But, again, there are serious downsides: tinkering within a dysfunctional system; limited evidence that change is either sustained over time or has an effect on other components/actors in the system (i.e. no systemic change).

The puzzle only got more complicated…

The Twaweza way

Being Twaweza, we decided for a third way: a combination of the most compelling elements of the two.

Distilling this down to guiding principles, we agreed that the public agency pilot in basic education, in each of our three countries, needed to fill the following criteria:

Find an issue which can be "traced" through the entire system – i.e. it's relevant directly in schools, but also important at ward and district, and also has resonance nationally.

It must have a citizen voice component. This will likely be focused at the community level, but can also include district, and national (where Twaweza plays a role). Look whether the various levels can reinforce each other.

Is must be an issue for which there is possibility of change – is it already a topic of debate, concern, implementation?

Look for the opportunities within the system where the issue can be tackled: the more windows of opportunity up and down the levels, the better.

The Twaweza way

Be specific about what would change look like? Changing policies, budgets? … Changing attitudes, norms, and behaviors? Whose behavior? Include actors from community, ward, district and national levels in this analysis.

Think hard and vet with others what would be the incentives to change, and what might be barriers to change. Include actors from community, ward, district and national levels in this analysis.

From exploration to practice

- In the three countries, we chose teacher absenteeism as the issue of focus (and in the case of Kenya, also pupil absenteeism). This issue intersects both education and governance domains. It's an issue that is visible and pressing at the community, district/county and national levels. It has the potential to galvanize various actors around it, and it's correlated with improved learning outcomes for children.

- Twaweza will work on addressing teacher absenteeism through a public agency approach. We will do so by enhancing spaces and processes in which citizens and authorities jointly shape decisions for the future of their schools and communities, focusing on presence (or absence) of teachers from their schools and classrooms. The pilot in each country will take place in two districts.

- The pilots will begin in mid-2016, and likely need 6-9 months to generate sufficient insights and early indicators to gauge the success of the approach.

- We are currently thick in the design phase, but we can give the following parameters…

	Tanzania	**Kenya**	**Uganda**
Districts	Ilemela & Mvomero	Baringo & Kilifi (Counties)	Moyo & Kabale
Focus issue	Teacher absenteeism (from school and class)	Teacher & pupil absenteeism (from school and class)	Teacher absenteeism (from school and class)
Main intervention components	An independent verification of teachers presence through classroom spot-checks, with local civil society and parents, combined with administrative data, will allow for selection of "most present" teacher in each participating ward. The selected teachers will be recognized publicly locally, at district level, and nationally.	An independent verification of teachers and pupil presence through classroom spot-checks, with local volunteers and parents representatives, combined with administrative data, will allow for selection of "most present" teacher and 'best performing school in pupil attendance'' in each participating ward. The selected teachers will be recognized publicly locally, at school, ward and county levels.	An independent verification of teacher presence through household visits (and checking of children's workbooks), will allow for selection of "most present" teacher in each participating ward. The selected teachers will be awarded at the community level.
Example of short-term hypothesis	The communities (local leadership, parents) around the treatment schools will demonstrate an increase in interest and engagement in school management, particularly as related to teacher accountability but also teacher welfare.		

IMMERSION 2016:
Stay tuned for implementation experience, including a thick learning component, and of course results of the pilots.