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EXPOSURE AND DIALOGUE PROGRAMS IN THE TRAINING OF DEVELOPMENT ANALYSTS AND PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

It is inherent in the nature of the beast that there will be a progressive disconnect between the working lives of development professionals and the lives of those their work is meant to help. This is bad purely from a technical point of view. But it is a gross moral disconnect, too. EDPs, or Immersions as they are also known, are a way of addressing this disconnect between development professionals and development reality. They involve exposure to the realities of the lives of the poor through staying with them and experiencing their lives for a period of time, however short. Some general design principles have emerged from experience. Clarity of objectives, prior preparation and facilitation, and ex post evaluation are all important. Immersions must be done well. The point, however, is that they must be done.

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1. Introduction

A great and grotesque paradox stalks the development community. Those who work to advance the wellbeing of the poor and down trodden seem to do rather well out of it themselves. The paradox had hardly gone unnoticed. The British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* of 30 September 2012 published an article with the headline "Revealed: taxpayer-funded aid consultants on six figures a year." The lead paragraph reads as follows: "The top payee is a former middle-ranking British police officer, now based in Jamaica, who was given almost 20 per cent more than the chief constable of his old force earned in the UK. Another British consultant receiving more than £200,000 a year from the aid budget is a former manager for the Timber Trade Federation, the trade association for the timber industry, who now runs a "sustainable forestries" programme in Indonesia. ...The disclosures will worsen the political row about British "poverty barons" collecting large sums of money from the swelling aid budget."[1]

A quarter century earlier, Graham Hancock (1989) wrote a book entitled "The Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige and Corruption of the International Aid Business." And a decade before that, Ross Coggins (1976) wrote a famous poem called "The Development Set," whose opening lines set the tone:

"The Development Set is bright and noble
Our thoughts are deep, our vision global;
Although we move with the better classes
Our thoughts are always with the masses."

Is the paradox real? Is it inherent and unavoidable in the development discourse? What, if anything, can be done about it? This essay addresses these questions. Briefly, the answers are that the paradox is indeed real and inherent and needs to be negotiated as an ethical and practical matter. One response to it is for development professionals to engage in what have come to be called "Exposure and Dialogue Programs" (EDPs) or "Immersions," to keep them in touch with the realities of the lives of the people their work is supposed to help.

[1] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9576104/Revealed-taxpayer-funded-aid-consultants-on-six-figures-a-year.html

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section 2 develops the nature of the paradox by examining the career paths of different types of development professionals, and it argues that these paths typically entail a progressive disconnect from the ground level realities of the lives of the poor in developing countries. Section 3 discusses the EDP methodology and illustrates with the specific case of the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO EDPs. Section 4 then takes a broader perspective on the use of Immersions in a range of development agencies, and how best to design these activities. Section 5 concludes.

2. Development Professionals and The Disconnect

Robert Chambers once observed:

"…it would seem that it is we the professionals, the powerful and the influential, and those who attend roundtables and summits, who have to reconstruct our reality, to change as people…" (Chambers, 1995, p. 203-204).

So the presumed problem solvers are part of the problem. [2] The reality of their working lives are so far removed from the reality of the lives they analyze and prescribe for, that questions must arise as to their assessments and their prescriptions.

Who are these development professionals? Several main categories come to mind:

(i) Academics who work on development across a range of disciplines, including economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, geography;

(ii) National level civil servants who are directly charged with addressing the needs of the poorest, such as those in Ministries of Health, Education, Rural Development, Gender, Urban Development, Poverty Alleviation, and apex ministries such as Finance and Planning;

(iii) Officials in multilateral and bilateral development agencies such as the World Bank, the Regional Development Banks, European Union Development and Cooperation Directorate, various United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA);

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[2] I include myself in this group, of course. This paper builds on my brief contribution to a Festschrift for Robert Chambers. See Kanbur (2011).

(iv) Think Tanks and networks such as the Center for Global Development (CGD), the Global Development network (GDN), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI);

(v) Advocacy and Implementation NGOs such Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE, Gender Action.

Of course, these professionals are not a uniform lump. There is considerable heterogeneity among them in terms of disciplinary background, field exposure and frameworks of analysis. For example, in terms analytical mindsets, in Kanbur (2001) I highlighted disagreements on economic policy as follows:

“Disagreements between whom? Any attempt at categorization and classification risks doing violence to a complex and richly textured reality. But the following grouping would be recognizable to many, and captures broad elements of policy disagreements. One group, call them Group A, could be labeled "Finance Ministry." In this group would obviously be some who worked in finance ministries in the North, and in the South. It would also include many economic analysts, economic policy managers and operational managers in the IFI's and the Regional Multilateral Banks. A key constituent would be the financial press, particularly in the North but also in the South. Finally, one would include many, though not all, academic economists trained in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Another group, call them Group B, could be labeled "Civil Society." This group would obviously include analysts and advocates in the full range of advocacy and operational NGOs. There would also be people who worked in some of the UN specialized agencies, in aid ministries in the North and social sector ministries in the South. Among academics, noneconomists would tend to fall into this group.”

However, in this paper I want to focus more on the similarities between Groups A and B, and other groups in the development professionals’ eco-system. And, indeed, eco-system might be the right term since in many ways the different groups need each other—to oppose or to support. Ross Coggins’ passionate poem damns high minded NGO critics as much as their supposed targets in international financial institutions:

“In Sheraton Hotels in scattered nations
We damn multinational corporations……
Thus guaranteeing continued good eating
By showing the need for another meeting.”

What is it, then, that binds development professionals together, albeit seeming adversaries at times? I take my lead from anthropologist Annelise Riles's characterization of various groups she studied in the run up to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (the "Beijing conference"):

"In describing the "networks" and "networking" as well as many other activities that captivated these persons' passions and commitments, I hope to understand the flurry of international activity, of which the UN women's conference is a part, as an effect of a certain aesthetic of information of which the world of NGOs, nation-states, international institutions, and networks is only one instantiation." (Riles, 2001, p. 2).

I want to examine how this common "aesthetic of information" comes about, starting with academics.

In my own discipline, economics, academic success is measured by publication of articles in the top journals. The same is true of my sub-discipline of development economics. There is a well-defined hierarchy of journals in the discipline and the sub-discipline. In order to get ahead, the young academic development economist must publish in the leading development economics journals, but the best is to get a development economics paper published in a top general economics journal. In order to get published, the paper has to be rigorous, by which is meant that it has to meet and conform to certain standards of exposition and proof. In economics, this means meeting the standards of quantitative and technical rigor. While there may be some dispute on what this means, the most recent being the controversies surrounding the use of Randomized Controlled Trails (RCTs), there is more agreement than disagreement on what falls within the canon and what lies beyond the pale. Within academic economics, certainly, even heated debates share "a certain aesthetic of information" which delineates what does and what does not constitute the acceptable mainstream.

Moving beyond economics to the broader social sciences, there are of course major methodological differences between economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, etc., not to mention differences within these disciplines, for example between different branches of anthropology. Kanbur and Shaffer (2007) explore alternative epistemological approaches in poverty analysis and find that they cut across many disciplines, albeit that economics does fall squarely in the "positivist" camp. Kanbur, Rajaram and Varshney

(2011), consider applications of different disciplinary approaches to the analysis of ethnicity and ethnic strife and highlight the need for complementarity so as to build on the strengths of different approaches. However, what I wish to emphasize here is that academic success in other social science disciplines is broadly speaking on the same metric as for economics, namely, publishing articles in prestigious journals and (more so in the broader social sciences) books with prestigious academic presses. Just as development economists who are more persuaded or less persuaded by RCTs would nevertheless agree on a common core of what constitutes quantitative rigor, academics from anthropology who would criticize economists' analysis of development would nevertheless recognize and pay homage to common measures of academic success such as publication, awards, appointment in leading Universities, etc. They too share this common aesthetic which cuts across academia.

The academic professors' aesthetic on what constitutes success also filters through, I believe, to the students they teach. Certainly the ones who plan to take up an academic career had better follow the standard battle plan and conform to what constitutes rigor, and even what constitutes innovation, according to the ruling aesthetic. And they do so, just as their teachers did so before them, and the aesthetic deepens like a coastal shelf, threatening to drown those who do not learn to swim in it. But even those who do not plan to follow an academic career are of course affected by their teachers. For economics, I have written about the core lessons that an economics graduate takes with him or her into the outside world (Kanbur 2002). But all students, across the disciplines, cannot but be affected by the striving to achieve standards for rigor and the appreciation of abstract mode of thought and reason. And this, by and large, is the pool from which national and international civil servants, think tank researchers and policy analysts, and NGO activists, are drawn.

While a development economics student is perhaps less likely than an anthropology or a sociology student to have been exposed to the realities of development "on the ground" through field trips and the like, the exposure of either to the lives of the poor in developing countries is likely to be minimal if they join an international development agency like the World Bank or the other agencies in category (iii) above. In an insightful commentary, Moises Naim (1994) wrote sharply about what he called the "G-4" syndrome. His observations are worth quoting at some length because they capture the generic issue in aid agencies and beyond:

“…The G-4 is not a grouping of countries. It is the designation of the US visa that non-US citizens on the Bank staff hold as long as they are employed by it….Upon termination of their bank-sponsored residency they-and their family-have only a few weeks to leave the United States….When the job loss also entails the instantaneous loss of the G-4 visa, the tax exemption status, education and health benefits and the rest of the prerequisites enjoyed by Bank staff, losing a job at the Bank becomes an event of catastrophic proportions….The Bank pays very well and offers benefits that are not easily found elsewhere. Furthermore, for many, the Bank is one of the few places in the world where there is a demand for their highly specialized skills. ….Staff "knows" that, in order to progress in the Bank, ideas are more important that actions, solid technical writing is more important than public eloquence, economic reasoning is respected while "soft," sociological-type analysis is belittled, and the opinion of colleagues and others in Washington matters more that the opinion of clients…. [V]ery few other organizations have the combination of extreme job-dependency, lack of competition and aloofness from the clients that allow the internal culture to be as self-absorbed as that of the Bank…. The implication of these observations is not that the Bank's performance can be improved by changing the visa status of its non-US employees. It is, rather, to use the G-4 effect to highlight the importance of subtle but powerful forces acting within the Bank and that are often ignored when discussing grand plans about the Bretton Woods institutions.” (Naim, 1994).

It should be clear of course that although Naim develops the G-4 metaphor, his characterization applies also to U.S. staff of the World Bank, and to staff of other international agencies the world over. More generally, his fundamental point is about the internal culture of aid agencies, and it extends equally to the culture of bilateral aid agencies as well. Further, although Naim points to the special role of economists and economic methodology, it is difficult to believe that the G-4 syndrome would not also infect non-economists in these organizations. The general point is that no matter how they entered the agencies, with whatever training and exposure and whatever roots of idealism, it is in the nature of these institutions as currently organized that individuals within them are bound to become more internally geared, rather than oriented towards helping the development of the poor in poor countries.

That which applies to the international civil service also applies to the civil service in developing countries. For high flying civil servants in developing countries there are in any case opportunities to move to positions in international agencies, and in some cases to move back and forth as a progression up the career ladder. But the same internal focus on the processes of a Ministry, rather than outward orientation to the needs of the poor, is likely to dominate. Rather like academia, bureaucracy (domestic and international) has its own criteria of success which may be different from those of academia but are equally distant from the reality of the lives of those that development professionals are meant to be serving.

Perhaps the most difficult case to discuss is that of NGO activists, those who have manifestly dedicated themselves to fight for the poorest of the poor, and indeed have perhaps turned down "cushy" aid agency appointments to do so, and in many cases are now battling the policies of these very same aid agencies. Surely there can be no gainsaying their connect with the ground level realities in developing countries? I would, however, like to highlight that, especially in advocacy NGOs based in the North, "civil service like" career structures can and do develop, and there are promotion paths to be followed. The world of within-NGO and cross-NGO coordination is as fraught with dangers of inward looking impetus as the G-4 culture of the World Bank as described by Naim. I would further note that many of the staff of these, especially Northern-based, NGOs are as much the product of the higher educational system in these countries as the staff of international aid agencies. It would not be surprising then if what Annelise Riles (2001) observed holds more widely, that they share "certain aesthetic of information." In the archetypal face off between International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and NGOs, opposed to each other though they are, the staffs of these institutions may be equally removed from the lived realities of the lives of the poor, about which they are arguing in what are often highly ritualized settings ("In Sheraton Hotels in scattered nations….").

So, I have argued that development professionals, in any of the major categories, are led inexorably to a greater and greater distance between their work and the reality of the lives of the poor in developing countries, whom their work is meant to be helping. For academics, the disconnect is caused by the currency of success in their field—publication according certain standards and criteria. For aid agency workers, the cause is the pressure to be become inward looking and focus on the organizational processes to achieve security, promotion and success. For the staff of NGO there are similar pressures, compounded by the fact that in effect the nature of the discourse with academics or aid agency officials is in a language and employs an aesthetic that makes it difficult to stay true to the lived reality of poor peoples' lives.

What can be done about this? Just as Moises Naim recognized that the solution to the World Bank's G-4 effect is not to rescind the G-4 visa category, in the same way there are no simple solutions to the dilemma of the disconnect between development professionals and the reality of poverty in developing countries, especially since being a professional means, almost by definition, a lifestyle removed from poverty. Further, professionalism and technical skills should indeed be deployed in the fight against poverty, and one should pay the going rate for these skills. It is too much to expect development professionals to don sack cloth and ashes to legitimate their contribution to the fight against poverty, even as we must be vigilant against them taking the moral ground too easily just because they are engaged in this fight, especially since many of them seem to do not too badly out of it for themselves and for their families.

One answer to this problem is to try and continuously update the connection between development professionals and the reality of the poor in developing countries. This can be presented purely from the point of view of efficiency and efficacy. Rather like sending a technician on a refresher course to keep up to date on the latest technical developments, there could be an attempt to sensitize development professionals to the changing realities of development, which may have altered quite a bit since they (or some of them) did their field work exposure as college students or young professionals. But it can equally well be a device for keeping fresh in the minds of development professionals why it is that they do what they do, make vivid for them the struggle against poverty, which their work is meant to help. In what follows I will describe and discuss such attempts and draw lessons from them. I begin in the next section with a specific exercise with which I have been involved—the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Exposure and Dialogue Program (EDP).

Section 4 then considers a broader set of experiences from a range of agencies, and pulls to together some design issues and recommendations.

3. The Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Exposure and Dialogue Program

This section will give an account of a particular attempt by academics, analysts and activists to ground their debates in poor peoples' lived reality. Imperfect as it is, the exercise may be helpful to others as a practical manifestation of the desire to reduce the disconnect between the working lives of development professionals and the lives of those they analyze, write about, and prescribe for. This Exposure and Dialogue Program is one example of a broad movement in the development community to institute a practice of "Immersions". The next section will look at the broader experience and draw implications for the training of development practitioners.

Cornell University is of course a world famous Ivy League University. It has a highly ranked economics program and, within that, development economics is even more highly ranked. Its development economists have published in the leading journals, and have held leading positions in developing country governments and in international agencies. They are among the leading economic analysts of labor and poverty in the developing world. SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, is an Indian organization which describes itself as follows:

"It is an organisation of poor, self-employed women workers. These are women who earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits like workers in the organised sector. They are the unprotected labour force of our country. Constituting 93% of the labour force, these are workers of the unorganised sector." (http://www.sewa.org/)

WIEGO, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is:

"A global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy." (www.wiego.org).

Thus Cornell is primarily academic; SEWA is primarily activist, and WIEGO combines action, policy and research.

A group of individuals from these three institutions came together in 2003 to build on previous discussions and interactions on differing perspectives on labor market and trade policy. In particular, the group was concerned about the gaps between mainstream economics on one side and heterodox economists, broader social scientists and ground level activists on the other, on a range of issues in economic policy. One emblematic issue was that of the minimum wage. Paraphrasing somewhat the arguments of SEWA and WIEGO, they were surprised at the visceral opposition to minimum wage legislation among mainstream economists, especially since they tended to support a range of other interventions such as improved education opportunity for girls and improving property rights for women. For SEWA and WIEGO activists, all these proposals, including that on a minimum wage, flow from the same framework, and they were perplexed as to why the economists they deal with in government, in international agencies and in academia have such a different reaction to minimum wages alone.

There was considerable interest in such a dialogue combined with significant good will among the individuals concerned, and discussions began to develop on how best to conduct the dialogue. The standard way would have been to meet, have presentations, discussants, critiques and so on. And indeed, the group did do this. But at an early stage the group introduced a new feature, which was that before each dialogue there would be an exposure to the lives of poor working women in the informal sector that SEWA and WIEGO worked with directly, and whose lives the work of the economists and analysts was meant to improve.

Members of the group had been influenced by the work of Karl Osner, who had introduced the EDP approach to his work when he was a senior official of the German aid agency (BMZ). As Osner notes:

"The trigger for the BMZ's initiative was a cross-sectional evaluation of the 80 state-owned development banks. These had been promoted for many years under financial development cooperation with an annual amount equivalent to 150 million euros….. The result of the evaluation sent shock waves through the Government, forcing the BMZ to react…..

- changes in pro-poor development policy;
- changes in promotional concepts or administrative regulations (i.e. **instruments**); and

- changes in the daily **practice** of development cooperation, which depend in large part on the **mindset** and **behavior** of the 'bureaucrats' responsible for this policy." (Osner, 2007, p. 129).

A key part of the third leg of the strategy was the introduction of "immersions":

During an immersion, people from developed countries or people who are relatively well off stay for a few days with people who live in poverty and are struggling to achieve a decent life by their own efforts. It is a short, in situ encounter with the reality of poverty and exclusion." (Osner, 2007, p. 129).

In fact, many of these immersions, which became the central part of a broader Exposure and Dialogue Program (see http://www.exposure-dialog.de/), had been hosted by SEWA and their members. Officials of BMZ, and German Parliamentarians and senior civil servants, would spend a few days experiencing the lives of the poor at close quarters. It was this component that the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO dialogue wove into their interactions, making it an EDP.

The Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO group have held five EDPs between 2004 and 2011, in Ahmedabad, India (2004 and 2008), Durban, South Africa (2007 and 2011), and Oaxaca, Mexico (2009).[3] Each EDP lasted three to five days, roughly evenly divided between Exposure and Dialogue. Members of the group were divided into pairs and, together with facilitators from local organizations, stayed one or two nights with the families of hosts who earned their living in the informal sector. With a few exceptions, the lead hosts were women. Each EDP was focused around a specific set of questions, and hosts were selected by local organizations with these issues in mind (for example, minimum wages, or trade liberalization, or organizations of the poor). After the Exposure, came the Dialogue around the issues. This dialogue could be fairly technical in nature, but was always informed by and tempered by the profound experience of the previous days of Exposure.

What was the outcome of this process? There are two sources of information. First, after each EDP, participants were asked to write up their experiences in the form of two short notes—one "personal" and one "technical." The compendium of notes for each EDP

[3] The members of the group are: Namrata Bali, Kaushik Basu, Suman Bery, Haroon Bhorat, Françoise Carré, Nancy Chau, Martha Chen, Gary Fields, Renana Jhabvala, Ravi Kanbur, Francie Lund, Karl Osner, Carol Richards, Jeemol Unni and Imraan Valodia. Although "Cornell" is used as the shorthand for "mainstream economists", it should be noted that some mainstream economists in the group were not from Cornell. Further, the group was joined by Santiago Levy for the Mexico EDP.

was put on the web. Secondly, the whole process underwent an assessment as part of an independent evaluation of WIEGO by their donors. The EDP component was evaluated by Professor Tony Addison, then of the University of Manchester and now at UNU-WIDER. This evaluation is also publicly available.[4] A summary and overview of the process, and the main lessons learnt from it, is available in Bali, Chen and Kanbur (2012b).

The notes are revealing about what the economists, in particular, felt they had learnt from the EDP process. Thus Gary Fields, one of the world's leading economists of Labor and Development, said the following after the first EDP in Gujarat, India:

"Because of what I saw on the ground, my professional judgment about minimum wages and supplementary benefits changed. With the standard labour economics model in mind, I had worried that the minimum wage might hurt the very women it was meant to help, because of a loss of jobs. In this context though, the minimum wage does not act as a wage floor. It acts as an aspirational target. If bidi rollers earn 36 rupees per 1000 bidis and a minimum wage is set at 80 or 90 rupees, there would probably be major job losses. However, the SEWA team is astute enough to take this into account, and so they negotiate for minimum wages, expecting that they will not be paid, at least not now. However, the very fact that a minimum wage is set at so (relatively) high a level strengthens SEWA's negotiating position…..Set in this way by negotiators who take full account of possible job losses as well as earnings gains, the minimum wage and Provident Fund are meant to help all of the women in their respective occupations and not, as is often the case in other contexts, insiders at the expense of outsiders. This kind of "wage" increase is something that I favour. Without this experience on the ground, that is not something I would have said two days earlier…..I will conclude with one final thought. I have long thought that if I do my homework before I set off on a trip, nine out of ten notions that I had before are confirmed, but it is the tenth one that makes the trip worthwhile. That is exactly what happened this time. Truly, this was a life experience I will never forget." (Fields, 2012, pp. 41-42). The technical and personal notes, by economists and non-economists alike, are full of such self-revealing comments. Santiago Levy, Vice President of the Inter-American Development Bank and formerly an economics professor and a Deputy Minister of Finance

[4] The Compendia have been brought together in the volume, Bali, Chen and Kanbur (2012a), and Addison's evaluation is reproduced as an Appendix in the volume.

in Mexico, joined us for the EDP in Oaxaca. His notes show the interplay in his mind between formal models and the lived reality of Rambo, the informal sector worker whose family was Santiago's host:

"Rambo told us that he left voluntarily his formal job as a security guard at the Club Med to get an informal salaried job as a waiter at a restaurant (also in Huatulco). On the other hand, Rambo was fired from the Home Depot firm (because he got into a fight). So Rambo's transits from formal to informal jobs have been both voluntary and involuntary. But note again that, from the perspective of the social goals of the government, it does not really matter whether Rambo's transits were voluntary or not. From that perspective, what matters is that at times Rambo was saving for a pension and for a house, and at times not; and at times was covered against death, health and disability risks, and at times not. Of course, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary transits does make a lot of difference for Rambo. In one case he thought he could improve his lot by moving from the Club Med to the restaurant; in the other he was fired, and he might have spent a while openly unemployed or in difficult circumstances until he found a new job." (Levy, 2012 pp. 496-497).

Suman Bery, Director of the National Council of Applied Economics Research (NCAER) in Delhi at the time of the EDPs, a senior World Bank official before that and currently the Chief Economist of Shell, wrote a moving account of his experience in his column in Business Times, a leading Indian newspaper targeted to the business community, under the heading "Mother Courage and her Children":

"This was my first experience of an urban slum in India. Two things surprised me: the fact of an established urban "working class" culture; and the apparent extent of social capital in that environment…. I left with mixed emotions. I applaud the efforts of SEWA to establish the rights of vendors to ply their trade free from police harassment, and to elevate the dignity of women's work….But I also left with a sense that the larger system was failing these poor people, despite their energy, civility, and enthusiasm. For the opportunity to put a face on urban poverty, and to see Indian cities in a truly different light, I will forever be in SEWA's debt-and that of my hosts." (Bery, 2012, pp. 87-89).

For his independent evaluation, Tony Addison interviewed most members of the group. His report was focused as much on what participants learnt from each other as their learning from the informal sector hosts:

"The EDPs have provided what amounts to a training in economics for the SEWA/WIEGO team of an unusual and innovative kind. It is clear that the EDP has significantly strengthened the ability of the non-economists to engage mainstream economists in debate….SEWA interviewees confirmed that they now have a much better understanding of mainstream economics than before the EDP…. What of the Cornell economists? ….Without exception, the Cornell economists all said that their time in the host households and their discussions with informal workers about their lives had given them a deeper understanding and had led to many new questions for debate in the subsequent dialogues and for later analytical work……One economist, from a developing country, who felt he knew his own country well and was therefore sceptical about whether the EDP would provide him with anything new, said: "I now truly believe that there is so much that researchers can get out of these interactions, and it breaks down the hierarchies that we all operate with….The fact that these processes of learning and analyzing take place outside of the normal academic environment is a key ingredient of the EDP's success. This came across clearly from every Cornell interviewee. One of the Cornell economists commented: "… the reality is so humbling that all the grandstanding just falls away that you see in conventional seminars. … and you are genuinely moved to understand their reality." (Addison, 2012, pp. 629-630).

The Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO experience is one specific example of an EDP. I have focused on it not only because I have been involved with it, but because it highlights a particular type of interaction which is interesting and important—that between academic mainstream economists and other analysts and activists, especially when this takes place in the shadow of the interaction of both with the object of the analysis and prescription, namely, the poor themselves. Some lessons can be drawn from this type of EDP, and they are highlighted in Bali, Chen and Kanbur (2012b). I will return to these lessons in the next section, but in the context of the broader experience of EDPs in other settings and with other agencies.

4. Immersions and the Development Community

An alternative and broader term for EDP, perhaps equally as well recognized in the development community, is “Immersion”. Surveying their development over the previous quarter century, Chambers (2007) noted the wide range of activities that fall under the rubric, albeit with a common theme:

“There is no template or formula. Some are self-organised or even spur-of-the-moment; some are organised with a programme. Some are open-ended for experiential learning; others are thematic, designed to focus on and learn about a topic or sector. Some are personal and individual; others more usually are in groups. An almost universal feature is, though, staying in a poor community, as a person, living with a host family, helping with tasks and sharing in their life….For all this the term immersion has come to be used: the visitor is immersed in daily life, having left behind the baggage of role, organisation, and importance, and stays for days and nights in a community.” (Chambers, 2007, p. 9)

The special issue of *Participatory Learning and Action*, 2007, from which this quote is taken, is an extremely useful collation of experiences from which design lessons can be drawn. In this section I will first review some of the experiences and then move to questions of design.

Among the agencies listed at the start of this paper are multilateral and bilateral aid agencies. Indeed, Karl Osner began the EDP in the German aid agency BMZ. In their assessment of immersions in SIDA, the Swedish aid agency, Nilsson, Sandkull and Sundberg (2007) raise an issue that is ever present:

“We know that some colleagues have questions – often unspoken – about immersions: about their relevance, the time required, the risks of ‘development tourism’, and the possible threats to their personal safety and comfort. We also know that until they can really see their potential benefits, it will be hard to overcome these barriers….Slowly, people are becoming more convinced: initial scepticism is declining, and interest in conducting immersions is on the increase both at Sida headquarters and at the embassies…. There is still a long way to go before immersions are truly institutionalised within Sida as common practice, but we have made progress….” (Nilsson, Sandkull and Sundberg, 2007, p. 120).

It is interesting that the challenges and experiences of an NGO, Action Aid, as elaborated by Ruparel (2007), are similar to those of bilateral (or multilateral) aid agencies: "….we are finding that it is not only governments and donors that are at risk of losing their links with communities; international NGOs such as ActionAid face the same challenge….There is some resistance to the idea of immersions, not by those who have experienced them, but by those who are reluctant to do so. The usual reason for not participating is: 'I don't have the time.' This usually means: 'I can't, or won't, make this my priority for my time.' We manage to make time for workshops in capital cities and for training courses, but we find it difficult to make time to spend with poor people, building relationships with them, and really listening to the voices that we don't usually hear….Another reason given for not doing immersions is: 'I come from a village, I don't need to do this.' While it is often the case that staff have such a background, an immersion offers an opportunity for them to stay with different communities that don't know them, their roles, and their status." (Ruparel, 2007, pp. 39-40).

A central finding emerges from these and other experiences. Those who have experienced immersions are their greatest supporters. Those who have not are more likely to be skeptical. This skepticism has the potential to lead to a bad equilibrium where immersions are not done because they are not done. The only way this equilibrium can be broken is through outside action—for example, by a mandatory requirement from their management that all staff in all development agencies, whether official or non-governmental, undertake an immersion at least once in their career and preferably at key points in their career such as at appointment and promotion. Indeed, participation in an immersion in the current position could be made a basic qualification for promotion. I can of course see the objections to this, that it becomes yet another box-checking exercise on the career ladder. But we have such box-checking all over the place. For example, having taken certain courses, or attended certain seminars, are indeed often requirements for even being considered for promotion within these agencies. I can think of worse forms of box-checking than that staff in a development organization actually have spent a few nights living with those whose lives the organization seeks to improve. There are other objections such as cost, but there is cost to all forms of training of staff. The question is whether this form of training, if one can classify it as that, is essential to a development agency.

None of this to gainsay the argument that immersions need to be well designed, monitored and followed through. The reason I have not spent more time on this issue is that each organization will need to design the immersion that best suits its needs and context. The Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO drew inspiration from the original EDP methodology of Karl Osner, but this was modified to fit our needs. As Osner notes in his reflection on these modifications:

"Unlike the classic EDP methodology as practised until now, the third phase of the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO EDP, the phase of Dialogue was given its own conceptual basis....It was intended that the resulting Dialogue in the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO EDP would be fed from two sources: from the ground-level experiences of the EDP participants during their Exposure and from the theoretical and conceptual inputs of the mainstream economists and the ground-level researchers and organizers participating in the Dialogue.... The experience at SEWA can lead to a new type of "Business and Issue-related Exposure and Dialogue Programmes for key decision and policymakers." This new type of EDP is meant to complement the existing types of EDPs, which are mainly concerned with sensitizing and motivating decision and policymakers for shaping pro-poor policy." (Osner, 2012, pp. 612-614).

Similarly, the immersions in different agencies will be done differently. Birch and Catani (2007) synthesize "elements of good practice" which include such general points as (i) adequate investment in preparation and orientation, (ii) appropriate facilitation and interpretation, (iii) willingness to embrace the personal and the unexpected, (iv) legitimation from employers and managers, (v) addressing ethical dilemmas in immersions, and (vi) impact assessment. These general principles need to be translated and implemented at the organization specific level.

I want to finish this section on immersions in the broader development community by focusing on a population that is of central interest to me and to this volume—students of development economics. Their teachers, academics that is, cannot easily be structured into EDP training. Unlike for staff in development organizations, EDP training cannot be mandated for University Professors, especially those with tenure. For them, persuasion by those who have already had the EDP experience seems the only route. What about their students? The course curriculum can indeed be designed so as to include an element of

EDP training. Many, but not all, graduate level courses in development economics, especially courses with titles like Master of Public Affairs (International Development), have a practicum component that involves internship with a development agency. However, this is more likely than not to be with agencies in one of the Northern or Southern capitals (indeed Universities located in these capitals boast of the proximity of these agencies and the opportunities this opens up for students). While there are of course some opportunities for exposure to the lives of the poor themselves, there does not seem to be as much of an emphasis on this as on more conventional insertions into organizational internships. Similarly, at the PhD level, although those doing dissertations on micro level data which they collect themselves will indeed get exposure to ground level realities, those who do dissertations using macro level data and standard household surveys that are now downloadable from websites, will not. Yet this latter group is as likely to be appointed to academic posts, where they will train the next generation, or to a range of development organizations where they will design and implement policies that will affect the lives of the poor.

Are EDPs feasible for development economics students? There are two issues—the time constraint and the financial constraint. On time, there are ever increasing demands on time to get students up to an ever advancing technical frontier. Given the current curriculum, and the current preferences of employers, my advice to students is to “tech themselves up” as much as they can. It would not be fair to any cohort to go against market trends, but I realize that in giving my advice I contribute to the current trap. What is needed is a systemic change, and in that context a tradeoff can indeed be made between the marginal specialized course in development economics and EDP training. In any event, the time costs of an EDP (10 days at most including travel time) are not significant, and the financial costs at the level of students (an airfare and minimal living expenses) are not huge. It is all a matter of objectives and priorities.

5. Conclusion

Let me draw together the threads of the argument, which has three main components. First, it is inherent in the nature of the beast that there will be a progressive disconnect between the working lives of development professionals and the lives of those their work is meant to help. Across a range of professionals, from academics through aid agency officials to NGOs, the focus will increasingly be inward oriented and further removed from the lives of the poor. This is bad purely from a technical point of view. The efficacy and efficiency of interventions designed by such disconnected professionals is bound to be problematic. But it is a gross moral disconnect, too, where development professionals make a good living in the name of a phenomenon they have no ongoing experience of.

Second, EDPs, or Immersions as they are also known, are a way of addressing this disconnect between development professionals and development reality. They involve exposure to the realities of the lives of the poor through staying with them and experiencing their lives for a period of time, however short. This is not perfect, and it is of course fraught with problems and danger of its own. Most importantly, it might encourage a “development tourism” syndrome where EDPs are seen in the same vein as exotic vacations. This has not in fact been the experience documented by those who have engaged in EDPs, including in the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO EDP exercise, but it is something to be watched out for. But since individual and institutional costs are often invoked as reasons for not doing EDPs by those who have not done them, and those who have done them find them to be valuable, the way of breaking out of the current equilibrium of minimal EDPs is to mandate them in organizations, and build them into student curricula.

Third, while there are some general design principles that have emerged from experience, EDPs need to be fashioned for each context, taking into account the culture of each organization, and its specific needs. The Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO EDP, for example, was designed as a vehicle to bridge the gap between mainstream economists and those who often oppose them from the activist and non-economist end of the spectrum. Immersions in aid agencies may naturally focus on areas where that agency has its operations. As experience has shown, clarity of objectives, prior preparation and facilitation, and ex post evaluation are all important. Immersions must be done well. The point, however, is that they must be done.

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