Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) Immersive Research

October 2017

Developed by the Immersion Research Team from Institute of Development Studies, Praxis and WaterAid

Methodology Note

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01 Background

A team of researchers from the Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) knowledge hub at the Institute of Development Studies, WaterAid and Praxis adopted an Immersive Research Approach (IRA) to try to gain in-depth understanding of ground realities and community perspectives relevant for the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G). We sought to learn and be open to emerging findings, while keeping a focus on behaviour change. **This note describes what we did, what we learnt, challenges we faced, and lessons and guidance for its use by others.**

02 What is immersive research?

The IRA that we adopted was inspired by past experience with immersions[1] and also by the Reality Check Approach[2] (RCA) which has now been used for policy and poverty related research in over seven countries. In our immersive research, as in the RCA, immersions are undertaken in a few purposively selected communities. **Researchers live with families, typically for 3-5 days and nights, and then meet together and compare findings. In their communities, they learn open-endedly from lived experience, observation and conversations. There are no questionnaires or interview schedules.** Efforts are made to offset elite bias and to include those who are marginalised or very poor, and also children, youth, women, girls and people with disabilities and aged. Meeting time and places are decided as per people's convenience. Relationships of trust are sought. Researchers participate in household tasks, wander around and observe, have unplanned conversations, are open to surprises and follow up flexibly on whatever is new and relevant.

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[1] For a substantial review of immersions see Participatory Learning and Action 57 Immersions: learning about poverty face-to-face, December 2007 **https://www.iied.org/pla-57-immersions-learning-about-poverty-face-face**

[2] **www.reality-check-approach.com/**

03 Context

We undertook this IRA in the context of the ongoing Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) with two purposes: to test and develop the IRA methodology; and to gain substantive timely insights which might not be so readily accessible with other conventional methods. We saw timeliness and depth as critical components because of the extreme urgency of the programme.

The SBM-G was launched in October 2014 with the target of achieving an open defecation free (ODF) rural India in five years. Although collective behaviour change is policy, and CLTS methods have been widely applied, the default mode has been to give priority to the easier task of toilet construction. Much has been achieved but the budget allocations and actual expenditures for information, education and communication (IEC) have been low and the quality of implementation of collective behaviour change approaches like CLTS at scale has been varied and often questionable[3]. Moreover, households gaining access to toilets do not necessarily all use them or use them all the time[4].

Praxis/Rohan Mukerjee

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[3] Source: **http://sanitation.indiawaterportal.org/english/node/3234**; Budget 2015: Sanitation and the Swachh Bharat Mission, March 2015

[4] Source: **http://www.accountabilityindia.in/how-swachh-bharat-two-years**; How Swachh is Bharat two years on? October 2016 and Report of the 2016 Rural Immersion Programme, Indian Institute for Management across 13 districts in Madhya Pradesh

04 Our process

We decided to work mostly in pairs, each member of a pair living with a different family in the same village. We recognised the importance of having female researchers for easy conversations with women and girls. The villages were to be in three districts declared ODF recently – three villages in Sehore in Madhya Pradesh (MP), two in Shamli in Uttar Pradesh (UP), and three in Pali in Rajasthan.

After agreeing to the overall objectives of the study, we identified village selection criteria and contacted agencies to help with access to village communities and host families.

We also brainstormed a long list of topics and issues, recognising that these could not all be covered. Major headings were:

- **many aspects of behaviour change - individual and collective, including intra-family dynamics**

- **behaviour change and vulnerable groups**

- **technology, and processes of construction and quality**

Criteria for selection were:

Villages recently declared ODF, with mixed populations of multiple castes.

Host families to be not very affluent or influential or playing an active role in implementing the SBM-G (e.g. not the Sarpanch or Panchayat Secretary), and including female-headed households (in case of female researchers).

OS Our approach to immersive research behaviour and ethics

We reflected on how we should behave. The list below draws on our experience in this IRA and may be of use to other teams that plan immersive research.

- Early on, meet and inform the Sarpanch and others in authority

- Listen actively and learn from the community

- Build rapport- introduce yourself, set an example of openness about yourself

- Be conscious of the limited means available to host families

- Get involved in daily activities of households and events in the community

- Respect of local culture and customs

- Explore times convenient for discussions and conversations (based on people's daily activities)

- Listen to anyone who wants to talk –researchers can be approached by anyone at odd hours

- Listen to minorities, those living on the fringes and outliers – a map (drawn or from the internet) and/or a list of religions/castes will help ensure inclusion (and ensure you reach out to those typically excluded because of gender, age and disability)

- Avoid taking notes during conversations but possibly use cards to note down discussion points visibly for respondents and take a photograph for record

- Only take photographs after seeking consent and if possible, send physical prints back to the community

- Avoid talking about toilets and sanitation at the first instance

- If needed/ useful, give a debriefing to the Panchayat and other officials on the last day

- When wandering around, take time and allow people to invite you in and let the conversations flow as per their interests

- Balance between sitting indoors and outdoors

- Try and engage children to take you around or to help with drawing charts

- Do not feel pressure to use facilitating tools

- Do not talk about sensitive issues that have implications on religious and caste sentiments, in any public forum

- Build trust - do not lock your bag and belongings, consider avoiding taking with you expensive gadgets and goods

- Have daily team meetings and reflection on the process and learning

06 The sequence of processes we adopted

The phases were:

1. **Two-day planning meeting**
   We discussed and agreed on the approach and process.

2. **An initial phase in three villages in Sehore District, MP**
   We began by living in three villages. 2–3 researchers constituted the team for each village and stayed there for three days and nights. A female researcher was included in each team. There was no pre-set sequence of activities. These evolved iteratively based on what had gone before.

3. **Two-day workshop for sharing, reflection and planning**
   We reconvened, and reported back to State and District officials, and took stock of immersion experiences in the three villages. Each team shared their learnings and reviewed their experiences critically. Key points to be corrected in the main phase were

that some host families were not from the poorer sections, and facilitation of the visit by a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) focused non-governmental organisation (NGO) made the community more conscious of their responses. The main phase villages were selected by non- WASH NGOs.

4. **The main phase**
   The main phase followed in two villages in Shamli District, UP and three in Pali District, Rajasthan.

5. **Workshop**
   We then reconvened to share and consolidate findings.

6. **Follow up**
   We followed up with a sharing workshop for other stakeholders, more in-depth analysis, writing of three reports – Policy and Practice Note, a Main Report, and this one on methodology – and wider dissemination efforts.

07 Agenda for our fieldwork

In the initial two-day planning meeting, we agreed on key issues for inquiry. Not all issues would be explored by all field teams, and new issues were expected to come to light. To illustrate, some of the potential aspects, not all of which could be covered, were:

- Inter- and intra-family dynamics in behaviour change

- What really makes a difference for women, men, youth, boys, girls and old people in terms of behaviour change

- Impact of IEC materials and processes and innovations in IEC

- Process of constitution of various committees, their roles and performance

- Social pressure and sanctions, social pressures within communities - what drivers are self-contained and which ones are more social

- What worked best from the CLTS triggering

- What is the impact on women: behaviour change, use of toilets and menstrual hygiene management

- How the burden of additional water collection could be reduced

- Social and political dimensions of inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised sections of society

- The dynamics of triggering, sanctions and incentives

- Socio-cultural and political dynamics in the locations in terms of behaviour change, construction, use and maintenance of toilets

- Process, strategies and mechanism of construction of toilets adopted in different locations

- Technology, toilet design and innovations

- Quality of construction

- Coverage and exclusion of households

- Case studies of best practices and changes

- Institutional sanitation and maintenance

Besides village level officials, those from whom we hoped to learn included members of the host family, champions, members of self-help groups, aged and people with disabilities, children, and those with toilets who do not use them.

Benefits of immersive research

As we experienced them, notable benefits were:

- **Immersive learning**
  Providing more insightful and nuanced findings than from conventional research. Immersions are also intense experiences of personal learning for those taking part.

- **Accessibility**
  People approached the team instead of team always approaching them. Children and youth were creative in providing valuable information. The team were invited into households. Inside their own houses people were comfortable sharing their experiences and concerns.

- **Unpacking complexity**
  The discussions encompassed the life situation of the family and the community, and was not limited directly to toilets and SBM alone.

- **Participatory approaches**
  Use of participatory tools and methods added value to the learning process through active participation.

- **Sensitive information**
  Private conversations allowed sharing and discussion on confidential and stigmatised issues (e.g. menstrual hygiene management).

- **Inclusive**
  Living in the villages allowed for meeting and discussions with those often missing in research such as the aged, young children, people with disabilities, marginalised, dalits, tribals, women, migrants and those living on the outskirts.

- **Identifying hidden dynamics**
  Some of the concealed undercurrents within the village such as caste, political and power dynamics, corruption and illegal practices of power holders, the drudgery of women and gender discrimination emerged from various groups.

- **Direct observation**
  Played an important part sometimes revealing the unexpected and confirming or correcting conversations.

- **Flexibility**
  Discussions occurred not only in prefixed venues, but in the houses, community halls, shades of trees, in the shops, at the corner of the play grounds, water collection centres, workplaces and so on.

- **Informality**
  Informal meetings and interactions were equally important as formal meetings and discussions.

- **Triangulation**
  Time and space was available to triangulate information and to get different viewpoints of different people in the communities. Unlike day visits, there was plenty of time, including for discussions in the early morning and especially after dark.

- **Timeliness**
  Immersive research enabled immediate feedback and findings to policy-makers, without the long lead times common with other research approaches.

Challenges faced in this immersive research

In addition to other issues mentioned above, four which stood out were:

- **Choice of host family and rapport building**
  The team did not always manage to live with a less affluent and/or lower caste family. Some Sarpanch's and affluent families insisted that researchers stay with them which identified us with these power-holders. Another challenge was to ensure that the host family did not end up feeling that they were a substitute for a hotel stay.

- **Biased information**
  When those accompanying any of us were allied with the Sarpanch, special efforts were needed to avoid biased information. In one village, the researchers were initially perceived as 'toilet inspectors'. Local languages and dialects – requiring interpreters from within the community– might add a layer of difficulty to this.

- **Capacity building**
  The research team itself may require training in attitude and behaviour change, and skill building in facilitating nuanced discussions as well as an orientation to participatory methods.

- **Team reporting**
  Any diverse team from different organisations, like ours, can face problems of coordination and reporting. A shortcoming of our work has been delays in finalising reports. We partially offset this by quick feedback through a sharing workshop and informal direct communication with the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation.

10 Findings and follow up

The findings raised an agenda for action, investigation and research. In addition to our own learning, which was considerable and vividly memorable, we conclude with a few insights with implications for policy, practice and research. These and numerous others are to be found more comprehensively in the main report and the policy and practice note (see **wateraidindia.in/immersion-sbm**).

- **Caste and power**
  The *Nigrani Samitis* (monitoring committees) and children committees were largely from the dominant castes, and in one case all from the Sarpanch's family.

- **Septic tanks**
  A high but unknown proportion of so-called septic tanks had no cement base. In one village, there were indications this might be around half of them. Baffles, cement bases and attached soak pits appeared to be rare. Self emptying with a pump either into the street or a nearby field was effectively concentrating open defecation (OD) near to dwellings.

- **Twin pits**
  Ignorance of technical details was widespread together with fears of early filling.

- **IEC**
  IEC in villages, if there had been any, appeared ineffectual.

- **ODF**
  Only one of the eight villages could be considered ODF. Verification had tended to accept 80-90 per cent coverage or even less – less than 20 per cent in one remote village. In all villages, there was unfinished business.

- **Water**
  Water was a significant variable affecting not just women but also linked with open defecation more than commonly recognised. Estimates for amounts of water needed for cleaning toilets varied widely.

Some of these are being followed up with commissioned rapid hunter-gatherer exploratory research to prepare statements of knowledge and what more needs to be known.

11 Final reflection and suggestions

The immersive research approach proved to be a great way of examining the realities of the Swachh Bharat Mission. As discussed in section 8, it has multiple benefits that allowed us to unpack some of the complexities of the real life of rural households and the dynamics happening around the sanitation drive, providing insights that other methods tend to miss out.

We therefore recommend researchers and practitioners alike to consider adopting such an approach when exploring issues related to sanitation or other developmental aspects, that require in-depth insights (which we would argue is almost always!).

The methods described in sections 4 and 6 are not set in stone, and we developed them in a pragmatic way, finding compromises and always asking 'what will help us all learn?'. We therefore encourage others to adapt the methods to the specific situation, topic and resources available.

There are, however, some non-negotiable principles that should be respected, which we have detailed and exemplified in section 5. They could be summarised in a key idea: "people know, learn from them". In the end, the immersive research approach is about taking the time to build the rapport and listen to people. It also involves an active effort to offset elite bias and reach out to those who are marginalised, very poor or disempowered. All this requires researchers to be reflexive, honest and open to surprises. It might seem a difficult task initially, but it is definitely worth the effort.

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