

WORKING PAPER **270**

Poverty Unperceived: Traps, Biases and Agenda

Robert Chambers
July 2006

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Robert Chambers

Abstract

With the priority of poverty reduction and with accelerating change in many dimensions, up-to-date and realistically informed perceptions of the lives and conditions of people living in poverty have come to matter more than ever. At the same time, new pressures and incentives increasingly trap decision-makers in headquarters and capital cities, reinforcing earlier (1983) analysis of the attraction of urban 'cores' and the neglect of rural 'peripheries'. These trends make decision-makers' learning about poverty and from people living in poverty rarer and ever more important. One common means has been rural development tourism, the phenomenon of the brief rural visit from an urban centre. In 1983, six biases of such visits – spatial, project, person, seasonal, diplomatic and professional - against seeing, meeting and learning from the poorer people, were identified and described. Security can now be added as a seventh.

Much can be done to offset the biases. The solution is to make more visits, not fewer, and to enjoy doing them better. In addition, new and promising approaches have been pioneered for experiential, direct learning, face-to-face with poor and marginalised people. Examples are: UNHCR's annual participatory assessments by staff; SDC's 'views of the poor' participatory research in Tanzania; and various forms of immersion, most recently those being convened and organised by ActionAid International. In many immersions, outsiders become guests for a few days and nights, and live, experience and learn in a community. The question now is not how an organisation can afford the time and other resources for immersions for its staff. It is how, if it is seriously pro-poor, it can possibly not do so.

This paper is a challenge to development actors to practice a responsible pro-poor professionalism; to be pioneers and champions, seizing and making space for themselves and others to offset the biases and traps of headquarters and capital cities; and to have the vision and guts to seek out direct experiential learning and so to be in touch and up-to-date with the realities of the people living in poverty whom they seek to serve.

Keywords: poverty, perception, aid, personal learning, biases, realism, immersions

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Note

The second section, Rural Poverty Unperceived, is reprinted with permission from chapter 1 of Robert Chamber's book (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Harlow: Longman, now Pearson Education. It is reprinted for five reasons: the theme and almost all the content appear to remain at least as valid as they were; the anti-poverty biases have been largely forgotten; when remembered, they have been used as a justification for not visiting rural areas at all; the biases can be offset; and promising approaches for experiential learning from and with people living in poverty have been evolved, but are not yet widely known or practised.

What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve about.
(Old English proverb)

I thought I knew about village life as my roots are in the village, and I still visit family in my village from time to time. But I know nothing about what it is like to be poor and how hidden this kind of poverty can be.
(Participatory researcher, Views of the Poor, Tanzania in Jupp 2004)

I would just say that the article is too oriented towards the outsider. It would be nice if something could be included from a member of the community – perhaps expressing their amazement that people who are experts in poverty don't even bother to spend time with them.
(Koy Thomson on this paper)

Contents

Abstract	3
Keywords, author note, publishing note	4
Acknowledgements	6
1 Context and relevance (2006)	7
1.1 Context	7
1.2 Learning and realism	7
1.3 Preoccupations of aid	8
1.4 Headquarters and capital traps	8
1.5 Digital addictions and tyranny	10
1.6 The personal dimension	10
2 Rural poverty unperceived (1983)	11
2.1 The urban trap	11
2.2 Rural development tourism	14
2.3 Rural poverty unperceived: the six biases	17
2.4 The unseen and the unknown	26
3 The biases reviewed (2006)	28
3.1 Spatial	29
3.2 Project	30
3.3 Person	30
3.4 Seasonal	31
3.5 Diplomatic	31
3.6 Professional	31
3.7 Security	32
3.8 Urban?	32
4 An agenda for action (2006)	33
4.1 Get out, visit, and offset the biases	33
4.2 Antidotes: direct learning and immersions	37
Bibliography	43

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1 Context and relevance (2006)

1.1 Context

This paper sets out to illuminate some problems of bias of perception of poverty, and some solutions for those who wish to offset these and find better ways of learning. The central thrust is to find effective and efficient ways of being in touch and up-to-date with the changing realities of people living in poverty.

It is written for development professionals who are concerned to reduce poverty, enhance equity and achieve social justice. Many are academics, communicators of various sorts, consultants, and researchers. The largest groups, though, are those who work in lending and donor aid agencies, whether multilateral or bilateral, in governments that receive aid, and in international and national NGOs. They may work in Northern headquarters, in developing countries' capital cities, or outside them.

The context is how for many professionals poverty is largely unperceived, and how there are anti-poverty biases in their visits, notably in rural development tourism – the brief rural visit by the urban-based outsider. These have remained, and even intensified, as problems, but have tended to slip out of sight and off the agenda. In the otherwise useful book *Finding Out Fast* (Thomas *et al.* 1998) the biases of rural development tourism receive only one mention (p. 151) and that does not say what they are or give a source. If even the authors of a book like that do not describe them, few development professionals may now be aware of them. Further, in the mid 2000s, the core or urban trap appears tighter than it was. Road travel may generally have become easier, but rural visits, especially by aid agency staff, are widely acknowledged and agreed to have become less common. The quality of such visits matters therefore now more than ever. In considering the significance of this, five clusters of factors stand out.

1.2 Learning and realism

First, *learning and realism*. The case for learning about and from poor people and understanding their conditions and perspectives has become stronger. At least in rhetoric, poverty is higher than ever on the development agenda. The complexity and diversity of poverty are better appreciated. At the same time, the realities of poor people are changing fast. The communications revolution has touched many more poor and rural people through television, cassettes, CDs and CDRs, radio, newspapers, telephone networks, mobile phones, email and internet, and has opened windows for them onto other lifestyles, not least those of the urban middle classes. Inequalities have become starker. In many rural and urban areas, livelihood strategies and livelihoods have diversified. The

conditions of living of poor people, and even more, their awareness and aspirations, are changing and changing faster than before.¹ For those committed to pro-poor policies and practice, the intensified challenge is continuously to learn and unlearn, to be in touch and keep up-to-date.

1.3 Preoccupations of aid

Second, the *preoccupations of aid*. The current preoccupations of aid, while embracing and seeking to tackle some problems, create others. The mesmerising focus on aid effectiveness, MDGs, results-based management, policy dialogue, harmonisation, deliverables, targets and outcomes diverts attention from much else that may matter more. The focus is reflected in words used and not used in official documents. The *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness – Ownership, Harmonisation, Alignment, Results and Mutual Accountability* illustrates this with its mentions of partner/partnership (96 times), donor (70), aid (61), effective (38), indicator (30), programme (22) harmonise (21) and result (20), as against no use at all of lender, efficiency (perhaps taken for granted), impact, outcome, power, relationship, rights, perspective, optimal or balance, and only one of learning. The implicit model of reality is mechanical and measurable, belonging to the paradigm of things, not of people,² of linear reductionism not of complexity or emergence. But well-founded development policies and practices also require what is missing – grounded and up-to-date realism, appreciation of diversity, and for aid agencies themselves, institutional learning and change,³ none of which are on this agenda.

1.4 Headquarters and capital traps

Third, *the headquarters and capital traps*. Since 1983, the urban trap has become more serious, and markedly so for the staff of aid agencies and INGOs. Increasingly, this has become a capital city trap.⁴ This includes headquarters in Northern countries, but refers mainly to capital cities in the South. In the past, donor and lender agencies had technical assistance personnel and field projects

1 That the rate of change for poor people is accelerating both in the conditions of their lives and in their awareness and aspirations, has been the view of participants in over a dozen workshops over the past two to three years.

2 A contrasting of the paradigm of things and the paradigm of people can be found in Chambers (1997: 36–8).

3 It is striking how much attention is given now to corruption and changes required in countries and governments receiving aid, and how little to institutional, personal and professional learning and change in aid agencies. Psychologists call this projecting.

4 For the capital trap see also Chambers (2005: 43–4).

to visit. As these became less fashionable and were more and more abandoned,⁵ and as sector-wide approaches, direct budget support and policy dialogue have become dominant and prestigious activities, so more and more time has come to be spent in meetings – between aid agencies trying to ‘harmonise’ with each other,⁶ between aid agency and government staff, and again between them and a proliferation of partners including civil society. This problem is compounded by the profoundly questionable aid policies of trying to do more for less, meaning with fewer staff. So spatially centralised are mindsets, that in aid agency parlance ‘the field’ now usually means the receiving country which in turn usually means the capital city; a field mission from the headquarters of an aid agency is a mission to a capital city, not to the field outside the capital.⁷ In parallel, a pandemic of workshops has spread like a virus through capital cities.⁸ Aid instruments and their acronyms have multiplied,⁹ demanding more reporting. Nor does a sector-wide focus diminish the trap. Rather, it generates a plethora of reports which are commissioned, received, and meant to be read, discussed and acted on; in the four years to 2005, there were 93 consultants’ reports on education in Rwanda (pers. comm. Renwick Irvine). The backlog of reports which have not been read, let alone acted on, preys on the consciences of agency staff and adds to the magnetic hold of the capital where they have to be read and followed up on. And then there are important visitors and visiting missions; all of which makes it easier to understand how, in another African country, two expatriate Social Development Advisers reportedly never

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- 5 See for example, Groves (2004). The abandonment of projects was often unethical, and reflected the ignorance and insensitivity of donors isolated in aided countries’ capital cities, and more so in their headquarters in their home countries. Had they been more in touch, in some of the ways suggested in this paper, they might have behaved better and argued for and adopted more humane policies.
- 6 Harmonisation can mean instructions from home headquarters to influence more powerful lenders or donors in an aided country. ‘... the fashionable joint funding schemes which are supposed to support harmonisation and supposedly create greater efficiency, seem to me to do the opposite – endless time spent in meetings trying to harmonise with folk who simply do not see things the same way and do not have the same set of values’ (pers. comm. Dee Jupp).
- 7 See for example, the usage in the Paris Declaration of ‘missions to the field’ and ‘field missions’.
- 8 On a visit to Ghana in 2003, the only time when aid agency staff could be met was at breakfast. Some of those who came left early because of a World Bank workshop on the PRSP (attended by at least 200 people). And there were at least two other major development-related workshops going on in parallel.
- 9 For example, the World Bank requires what Wilks and Lefrancois (2002) characterise as an ‘assessment overload’ of up to 16 analytical reports in its client countries, each of which is liable to accentuate the capital trap as officials, consultants and others struggle to complete them. Intentions to harmonise demands for reports were articulated in the Declaration adopted at the High-Level Forum on Harmonisation in Rome in February 2003, and in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness adopted in March 2005.

went outside the capital city in the first nine months of their posting. Where there is a security problem, the hold of the capital city is even more severe, especially for those in the UN whose insurance policies may not cover visits to villages: a senior adviser engaged in drafting a national development strategy may never have been outside the capital.¹⁰ For some aid agency staff, perhaps many, rural visits are only possible in their own time at weekends, if then. The pathology of isolation and ignorance is stark.

1.5 Digital addictions and tyranny

Fourth, *digital addictions and tyranny*.¹¹ Mobile phones make staff accessible wherever they are. The internet has transformed access, information, activities and relationships. To learn about poverty, the visit may now be to a website, not a village. Email has become at the same time resented, addictive and tyrannical, tying staff more and more to their computer screens, and reducing personal contact. Aid agency staff, in particular, are more vulnerable than ever to instant demands from a distant head office. A senior official of a multilateral bank received a long and imperious email from his boss in headquarters just as he was going into a morning of back-to-back meetings. When he came out of these, he found a reminder asking why he was taking so long to reply. This dominating and demoralising use of email appears to have gone largely unremarked. Blackberry is for the time being the ultimate means for intrusive invasion and erosion of private time and space; someone known to have one cannot hide. Hierarchy can then be strengthened, together with an orientation upwards to authority rather than downwards to poor and marginalised people. And the central place and capital city trap is again reinforced.

1.6 The personal dimension

Fifth, the *personal dimension*. Aid agency, senior government and NGO staff in capital cities may be allured by the prestige and importance of policy dialogue. This is seductive for almost all of us, perhaps especially when early in our careers. That is how to make a difference. And better it may seem to be seen and heard speaking well in a meeting, than to be unseen listening to and learning from poor people. There may, too, be a reluctance to expose oneself, to be physically or morally uncomfortable, to be confronted by the realities of poverty, or to be, or be thought to be, some sort of poverty voyeur. There is an understandable psychopathology here of avoidance. Better, the rationalisation can be, to go nowhere near poverty, to shut it out, than to have any exposure

10 In Kabul, in May 2006, I was told of another advisor who had been in the country for three months who only knew his guesthouse, the UN compound, and the road route that he was daily driven on between the two.

11 I owe the idea of this paragraph, about, as he put it, 'online bias', to John Gaventa.

that might be blurred, distorted or misleadingly unrepresentative. The biases of the organised visit of rural development tourism can even be an excuse – ‘I have heard all about that. I am not going to fall for that’, as it has been expressed. It is easy for development professionals in capital cities to find ‘good’ reasons for not going out and meeting poor people.

These five clusters of factors – *learning and realism, the preoccupations of aid, the capital trap, digital addiction and tyranny, and the personal dimension* – combine to make questions of how poverty is perceived, not perceived or misperceived, even more critical today than they were in the early 1980s when the section that follows was written. The rise in urban populations makes the brief urban visit and its similar biases a more important topic than it was. But most of the very poor people in the world are still to be found in rural areas. Even if less common, the practice of rural development tourism persists, as do its biases. Every day there must be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of cases around the world. And such visits, rural or urban, remain for many development professionals their main source of perceptions or misperceptions of the realities of poor people.

For these reasons this paper revisits and updates the core-periphery and rural development tourism analysis of the early 1980s, inviting the reader to judge its contemporary relevance. The text begins with some of the other forces which hold and retain academics, government officials and foreigners in urban traps, and which were evident at that time.

2 Rural poverty unperceived (1983)¹²

2.1 The urban trap

... the international system of knowledge and prestige, with its rewards and incentives ... draws professionals away from rural areas and up through the hierarchy of urban and international centres. They are also attracted and held fast by better houses, hospitals, schools, communications, consumer goods, recreation, social services, facilities for work, salaries and career prospects. In third world countries as elsewhere, academics, bureaucrats, foreigners and journalists are all drawn to towns or based in them. All are victims, though usually willing victims, of the urban trap. Let us consider them in turn.

For academics, it is cheaper, safer and more cost-effective in terms of academic output, to do urban rather than rural research. If rural work is to be done, then peri-urban is preferable to work in remoter areas. Rural research is carried out

¹² This section is from Chambers, Robert (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*: 7–25, London: Longman now Harlow: Pearson Scientific, which remains available in print.

mainly by the young and inexperienced. For them, rural fieldwork is a rite of passage, an initiation which earns them the right to do no more, giving them a ticket to stay in the town. But the fieldwork must first be performed in the correct manner as prescribed by custom. The social anthropologist has to spend a year or so in the village, the sociologist to prepare, apply, analyse and write up a questionnaire survey. The ritual successfully completed, the researcher is appointed and promoted. Marriage and children follow. For women, pregnancy and childcare may then dislocate a career and prevent further rural exposure.¹³ For men, family responsibilities tie less, but still restrain. Promotion means responsibility and time taken with teaching, supervising, administration, and university or institutional politics. The stage of the domestic cycle with small children means accumulation of responsibilities – driving children to school and picking them up again, family occasions, careful financial management to make ends meet, moonlighting and consultancies to supplement a meagre salary – all of which take time.

The researcher has now learnt enough to make a contribution to rural research. He or she has the confidence and wit to explore new ideas and to pursue the unexpected. There is evidence enough of this in the books by social anthropologists who have undertaken second and subsequent spells of fieldwork. But it is precisely at this time that the able academic is chained to desk, lectern and home. If the university rewards ability, then the more able persons are likely to be most trapped. Ageing, ability, promotion and the domestic cycle conspire to prevent further rural contact.

The amalgam which glues these forces together and finally immobilises the would-be rural researcher in mid-career is over-commitment. It is a mystery why so many of the presumably intelligent people who do research are so miserably incompetent at managing their own lives. Academics can be found who are simultaneously supervising half a dozen theses (if their students can get near them), managing a major research project (actually managed by a junior administrator and by field staff), lecturing (from old notes or off-the-cuff), sitting on a dozen committees (or sending in, or failing to send in, apologies for absence), writing a couple of books (or adding notes to the draft by the junior author), developing a new curriculum or course (which for lack of time ends up much like a previous one), and carrying out a consultancy for an aid agency (which, for inescapable financial reasons, takes priority over all else). To judge from a limited and scattered sample, I suspect a positive correlation between over-commitment at work and size of family, though whether this reflects a lack of restraint and planning in both domains may be an idle speculation. But for such people, over-commitment is an addiction. In extreme cases, they take on more and more and complete less and less, complete it less and less well and, as they become more eminent, are less and less likely to be told their work

13 Changes in gender relations and an organisation's policies mean that women's careers are perhaps on the whole less disrupted by pregnancy and parenthood than they were, but it still happens on a wide scale.

is bad. Needless to say, there is also less and less time for any direct rural exposure; for the demands of students, researchers, administrators, committees, new curricula, books and consultancies all require presence in town. Ambition, inefficiency, and an inability to say no, tie the academic down, as an urban prisoner. Parole is rare and brief; rural contact is restricted to hectic excursions from the urban centre where the university or institute is sited.

For government staff, there are similar pressures and patterns. On first appointment, when ignorant and inexperienced, technical or administrative officers are posted to the poorer, remoter, and politically less significant areas. Those who are less able, less noticed, or less influential, remain there longer. The more able, and those who come favourably to attention or who have friends in headquarters, are soon transferred to more accessible or more prosperous rural areas, or to urban centres.

Administration is, anyway, an urban-based and urban-biased activity. So with promotion, contact with rural areas, especially the remoter ones, recedes. If a serious error is committed, or a powerful politician offended, the officer may earn a 'penal posting', to serve out punishment time in some place with poor facilities – a pastoral area, an area without irrigation, an area distant from the capital, an area which is hot and unhealthy – in short, a place where poorer people will be found. But the pull of urban life will remain; children's education, chances of promotion, congenial company, consumer goods, cinemas, libraries, hospitals, and quite simply power; all drawing bureaucrats away from rural areas and towards the major urban and administrative centres.

Once established in offices in the capital city, or in the regional or provincial headquarters, bureaucrats too are trapped. Unless they are idle and incompetent, or exceptionally able and well supported, they are quickly over-committed. They are tied down by committees, subcommittees, memoranda, reports, urgent papers, personnel problems, financial management, and the professional substance of their work. There are political demands to which they must be able to react swiftly and efficiently. There are times of the year, during the budget cycle, when they cannot contemplate leaving their desks. The very emphasis on agricultural and rural development creates work, which holds them in their offices.

If the government is inactive, they may be relatively free. But the more the government tries to do, so the more paperwork is generated, the more coordination and integration are called for, the more reports have to be written and read, and the more inter-ministerial and inter-departmental coordination and liaison committees are set up. The more important these committees become, so the more members they have, the longer their meetings take, and the longer their minutes grow. The demands of aid agencies are a final straw, requiring data, justifications, reports, evaluations, visits by missions, and meetings with ministers. More activity, more aid, more projects, more coordination – all these mean more time in the office and less in the field.

Foreigners are also urban-based and urban-biased. Foreigners in third world countries who are concerned with rural development and rural poverty include

staff in voluntary agencies and aid organisations, technical cooperation personnel of various sorts, and consultants. Many voluntary agency workers and a few technical cooperation staff do live in rural areas. But most of these foreigners are also urban-based, many of them in capital cities, and have the familiar problems of paperwork, meetings and political and family pressures which tie them there. In addition, their rural movements may be restricted by a suspicious government, or smothered in protocol. Their perceptions vary from the acute and correct to the naive and mistaken. They often labour under the notorious difficulties and distortions of having to rely on interpreters, of being taken on conducted tours, and of misleading responses from those met.

A final group, neglected yet vital for the formation of opinion about rural life, are journalists. They combine the most direct access to mass media with the severest constraints on rural exposure. Journalists who wish to visit a rural area have three problems. First, they must persuade their editor that the visit is worthwhile. This is difficult. In terms of news, it is almost always quicker and cheaper to look for and write up an urban story; moreover a disproportion of newspaper readers are urban dwellers interested in urban news. Second, journalists must be sure to get a story. This usually means a visit either in special company (for example, the Prime Minister's visit to a region) with an official entourage and all that goes with it, or to an atypical rural place where there is either a project or a disaster. Third, journalists cannot hang around. They must find out what they want quickly and write it up quickly. Checking information is difficult, and with rural people who are unlikely to read what is written let alone sue, the incentive to check it is low. It is the one-off rushed and unconfirmed interview which appears in quotation marks in the newspaper article. Like academics, bureaucrats and foreigners, journalists are both actors and victims in the brief rural visit.

2.2 Rural development tourism ¹⁴

For all these urban-based professionals, the major source of direct experience of rural conditions is, then, rural development tourism, the phenomenon of the brief rural visit. This influences and is part of almost all other sources of information. It is extremely widespread, with perhaps tens of thousands of cases daily in third world countries. In spite of its prevalence, it has not, to my knowledge, been seriously analysed. This omission is astonishing until one reflects on the reasons. For academic analysis, rural development tourism is too dispersed and ephemeral for convenient rigour, not neatly in any disciplinary domain, and barely conceivable as the topic for a thesis. For practical professionals engaged in rural development, it is perhaps too near the end of

14 The term rural development tourism was adapted from John P. Lewis, who in 1974 described himself as a 'rural area development tourist' in India. The biases identified owed much to those, including Scarlett Epstein and Richard Longhurst, who took part in a one-day brainstorming at IDS in the mid-1970s.

the nose to be in focus. Rural development tourism is, moreover, a subject of anecdote and an object of shame. It generates stories for bar gossip rather than factors for comparative study, and evokes memories of personal follies one prefers not to expose to public ridicule. In any case, self-critical introspection is not one of the more prominent characteristics of rural developers. Yet it is through this rural development tourism, if at all, that 'core' (urban based, professional, powerful) visitors see and meet those who are 'peripheral' (rural, uneducated, weak). The brief rural visits by 'core' personnel can scarcely fail to play a key part in forming their impressions and beliefs and influencing their decisions and actions.

Let us examine the phenomenon. The visits may be for one day or for several. The 'tourists' or visitors may come from a foreign country, a capital city, a seat of regional or provincial government, a district headquarters, or some smaller urban place. Most commonly, they are government officials – administrators, health staff, agriculturalists, veterinarians, animal husbandry staff, educators, community developers, engineers, foresters, or inspectors of this and that – but they may also be private technical specialists, academic researchers, the staff of voluntary agencies, journalists, diplomats, politicians, consultants, or the staff of aid agencies. Differing widely in race, nationality, religion, profession, age, sex, language, interests, prejudices, conditioning and experience, these visitors nevertheless usually have three things in common: they come from urban areas; they want to find something out; and they are short of time.

Rural development tourism has many purposes and many styles. Technical specialists concerned with physical resources may in practice have little contact with rural people, and there may be little formality about their visits. Others – those concerned with administration and human development in its various forms – may in contrast be involved in many meetings with rural people. It is with these kinds of visits that we are primarily concerned. It is tempting to caricature, and exaggeration is built into any process of induction from anecdotes which are repeated and remembered because they make good stories. There are also differences between cultures, environments and individual tourists. But it may hold generally that the older, more senior, more important, and more involved with policy the tourist is, so the larger will be the urban centre from which he¹⁵ leaves, and the more likely his visit is to be selective and formally structured. The more powerful professionals are, the less chance they have of informal learning.

A sketch can illustrate the problems¹⁶ of such visits by the powerful, important, and distinguished. The visitor sets out late, delayed by last minute business, by

15 The male biased syntax is deliberate and descriptive. Most rural development tourists are men.

16 Another problem is the cavalcade. The more the layers of hierarchy – international, national, regional, district, sub district – and the more the departments and institutions involved, so the number of vehicles increases. This adds to dust and mud if the tarmac is left, and to delay even if it is not. The record is held by a visit in Indonesia to inspect

colleagues, by subordinates or superiors anxious for decisions or actions before his departure, by a family crisis, by a cable or telephone call, by others taking part in the same visit, by mechanical or administrative problems with vehicles, by urban traffic jams, or by any one of a hundred forms of human error. Even if the way is not lost, there is enough fuel, and there are no breakdowns, the programme runs behind schedule. The visitor is encapsulated, first in a limousine, Land Rover, Jeep or car and later in a moving entourage of officials and local notables – headmen, chairmen of village committees, village accountants, progressive farmers, traders, and the like.

Whatever their private feelings, (indifferent, suspicious, amused, anxious, irritated, or enthusiastic), the rural people put on their best face and receive the visitor well. According to ecology, economy and culture, he is given goats, garlands, coconut milk, coca-cola, coffee, tea or milk. Speeches are made. Schoolchildren sing or clap. Photographs are taken. Buildings, machines, construction works, new crops, exotic animals, the clinic, the school, the new road, are all inspected. A self-conscious group (the self-help committee, the women's handicraft class), dressed in their best clothes, are seen and spoken to. They nervously respond in ways which they hope will bring benefits and avoid penalties. There are tensions between the visitor's questions and curiosity, the officials' desire to select what is to be seen, and the mixed motives of different rural groups and individuals who have to live with the officials and with each other after the visitor has left. Time and an overloaded programme nevertheless are on the officials' side. As the day wears on and heats up, the visitor becomes less inquisitive, asks fewer questions, and is finally glad to retire, exhausted and bemused, to the circuit bungalow, the rest house, the guest house, the host official's residence, or back to an urban home or hotel. The village returns to normal, no longer wearing its special face. When darkness falls and people talk more freely, the visitor is not there.

Shortage of time, the importance of the visitor, and the desire for information separately or together influence what is perceived. Lack of time drives out the open-ended question; the visitor imposes meanings through what is asked. Checking is impossible, and prudent, hopeful, or otherwise self-serving lies become accepted as facts. Individually or in groups, people are neglected while formal actions and physical objects receive attention. Refugees in a rural camp in Tanzania said of UN and government officials that 'They come, and they sign the book, and they go', and 'They only talk with the buildings'. A villager in Senegal said to Adrian Adams concerning visitors: 'Ils ne savent pas qu'il y a ici des gens vivants'¹⁷ (Adams 1979: 477). Above all, on such visits, it is the poorer people who tend not to be seen, far less to be met.

a road being financed by USAID. Douglas Tinsley reports that there were 47 vehicles involved. Ferries had to be used where bridges were not complete. At one ferry, it took three hours to get the whole procession across. But there was a positive side, one supposes. The christening of the road was substantial, and the visitors cannot have been too rushed in their inspection of the quality of the roadwork, at least near the ferries.

2.3 Rural poverty unobserved: the six biases

Many biases impede outsiders' contact with rural poverty in general, and with the deepest poverty in particular. These apply not only to rural development tourists, but also to rural researchers and local-level staff who live and work in rural areas. Six sets of biases stand out:

i) Spatial biases: urban, tarmac and roadside

Most learning about rural conditions is mediated by vehicles. Starting and ending in urban centres, visits follow networks of roads. With rural development tourism, the hazards of dirt roads, the comfort of the visitor, the location of places to visit and places for spending the night, and shortages of both time and fuel dictate a preference for tarmac roads and for travel close to urban centres. The result is overlapping urban, tarmac and roadside biases.

Urban bias concentrates rural visits near towns and especially near capital cities and large administrative centres. But the regional distribution of the poorest rural people often shows a concentration in remoter areas – north-eastern Brazil, Zambia away from the line of rail, lower Ukambani in Kenya, the Tribal Districts of Central India, the hills of Nepal. In much of the developing world, some of the poorest people are being driven from those densely populated areas better served with communications and are being forced, in order to survive, to colonise less accessible areas, especially the savannahs and forests. Hard to reach from the urban centres, they remain largely unseen.

Tarmac and roadside biases also direct attention towards those who are less poor and away from those who are poorer. Visible development follows main roads. Factories, offices, shops and official markets all tend to be at the sides of main roads. Even agricultural development has a roadside bias: in Tamil Nadu agricultural demonstrations of new seeds and fertilisers have often been sited beside main roads; and on irrigation systems, roads follow canals so that the farms seen are those of the topenders who receive more water and not those of the tailenders who receive less or none. Services along roadsides are also better. An improved tarmac or all-weather surface can bring buses, electricity, telephone, piped water supply, and better access to markets, health facilities and schools. Services near main roads are better staffed and equipped; Edward Henevald found that two schools near a main highway in Sumatra had more than their quota of teachers, while a school one kilometre off the road had less than its quota.

When roads are built, land values rise and those who are wealthier and more influential often move in if they can. In Liberia, new rural roads were followed by speculators rushing to acquire deeds and to buy or to displace local farmers (Cobb *et al.* 1980: 12–16). For part of Western Kenya, Joseph Ssenyonga had

17 'They do not know that there are living people here.'

described a similar tendency for the wealthier and more influential to buy up roadside plots, creating an 'elite roadside ecology' (1976: 9). So the poorer people shift away out of sight. The visitor then sees those who are better-off and their houses, gardens, and services, and not those who are poorer and theirs. Ribbon development along roadsides gives a false impression in many countries. The better the road, the nearer the urban centre, and the heavier the traffic, so the more pronounced is the roadside development and the more likely visitors are to see it and be misled.

Nor does spatial bias apply only to main roads. Within villages, the poorer people may be hidden from the main streets and the places where people meet. M.P. Moore and G. Wickremesinghe, reporting on a study of three villages in the Low Country of Sri Lanka, have this to say about 'hidden poverty':

In retrospect at least, one of the most obvious aspects of poverty in the study villages is the extent to which it is concealed from view ... the proportion of 'poor' households ... varies from 14 per cent in Wattedagama to 41 per cent in Weligalagoda. Yet one could drive along all the motorable roads in the villages and scarcely see a single 'poor' house. Here, as in most of rural Sri Lanka, wealthier households use their social and economic power to obtain roadside homestead sites. Not only do these confer easier access to such tangible services as buses, electricity connections or hawkers, but they provide such intangible benefits as better information and gossip from passers-by. Equally, the roadside dweller has a potential site for opening a small shop, especially if located near the all-important road junctions, which provide the focus of commercial and social life in almost all rural areas. *To even see the houses of the poor one often has to leave the road. Many visitors, including public officers, appear not to do so very often.*

(1980: 59; emphasis added)

The same can be said of Harijan colonies in or near villages in South India, and of Basarwa (Bushmen) in or outside the villages of the Kalahari. Peripheral residence is almost universal with the rural poor.

It is not just the movements of officials that are guided by these spatial biases of rural development tourism. Social science researchers are far from immune. There are honourable exceptions, but urban and tarmac biases are sometimes evident in choices of villages to study. Of all specialists, social anthropologists are perhaps the least susceptible, but even they sometimes succumb: as they have grown, Bangalore and Bangkok have each swallowed up a social anthropologist's village.¹⁸ Again, when Indian institutions were urged to adopt villages, two research and training organisations in Bangalore, unknown to each other, included the same village: it can scarcely be a coincidence that it was close to the main Bangalore-Mysore road, a decent but convenient distance from

18 This does not necessarily reflect adversely on the choice of villages, since peri-urban villages, like any others, are a legitimate subject of study.

Bangalore itself. Within villages, too, the central, more prosperous, core is likely to attract researchers.

Moore, again describing three villages in Sri Lanka, writes:

Apart from the roadside issue, the core can exercise a great pull on the outsider who decides to do a few days' or a week's fieldwork. Apart from the facilities and the sense of being at the strategic hub of local affairs, it can claim a sense of history and tradition, to which sociologists especially appear vulnerable.

(1981: 48)

He considers that sociologists writing on Sri Lanka have mostly focused on core areas and completely ignored the peripheries. One may speculate about how generally the location of good informants and of facilities at the cores of villages prevent perception by social scientists of the peripheral poor.

Urban bias is further accentuated by fuel shortages and costs. When fuel costs rise dramatically, as they have done in recent years, the effect is especially marked in those poor countries which are without oil and also short of foreign exchange. The recurrent budgets of government departments are cut. Staff are difficult to shed, so the cuts fall disproportionately on other items. Transport votes are a favourite. Rural visits, research and projects shrink back from more distant, often poorer areas to those which are closer, more prosperous, and cheaper to visit.¹⁹

In Zambia, the travel votes of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Development could buy in 1980 only one fifth of the petrol they could buy in 1973 (ILO 1981: 74) and senior agricultural extension staff were virtually office bound. In Bangladesh, similarly, district agricultural officers have been severely restricted in their use of vehicles. In India, cuts have occurred in transport allocations for staff responsible for supervising canal irrigation: the likely effects include less supervision leading to less water reaching the already deprived areas and less staff awareness of what is happening there. Every rise in oil prices impoverishes the remoter, poorer people by tilting the urban-rural terms of trade against them, and at the same time reduces the chances of that deprivation being known. Visits, attention and projects are concentrated more and more on the more accessible and more favoured areas near towns.

19 An early example is provided by Zambia's fuel shortage which led to fuel rationing, following Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence in 1965. One effect was that the Universities of Nottingham and Zambia joint research project concerned with the productivity of agricultural labour was restricted to work in two areas instead of three, and these were areas which were relatively well-developed agriculturally, having had large inputs of education, extension and communication (Elliott 1970: 648).

ii) Project bias

Rural development tourism and rural research have a project bias. Those concerned with rural development and with rural research become linked to networks of urban-rural contacts. They are then pointed to those rural places where it is known that something is being done – where money is being spent, staff are stationed, a project is in hand. Ministries, departments, district staff, and voluntary agencies all pay special attention to projects and channel visitors towards them. Contact and learning are then with tiny atypical islands of activity which attract repeated and mutually reinforcing attention.

Project bias is most marked with the showpiece: the nicely groomed pet project or model village, specially staffed and supported, with well briefed members who know what to say and which is sited a reasonable but not excessive distance from the urban headquarters.²⁰ Governments in capital cities need such projects for foreign visitors; district and sub district staff need them too, for visits by their senior officers. Such projects provide a quick and simple reflex to solve the problem of what to do with visitors or senior staff on inspection. Once again, they direct attention away from the poorer people.

The better known cases concern those rural development projects which have attracted international attention. Any roll of honour would include the Anand Dairy Cooperatives in India; the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit in Ethiopia; the Comilla Project in Bangladesh; the Gezira Scheme in Sudan; the Intensive Agricultural Districts Programme (IADP) in India; Lilongwe in Malawi; the Muda Irrigation Project in Malaysia; the Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya; and some *ujamaa* villages in Tanzania. These have been much visited and much studied. Students seeking doctorates have read about them and then sought to do their fieldwork on them.²¹

20 Or close to the famous tourist site for the VIP, such as the Taj Mahal at Agra in India. J.K. Galbraith has written that as hopes and enthusiasm for rural community development in India waned, 'a number of show villages continued to impress the more susceptible foreign visitors'. He records this incident:

In the spring of 1961, Lyndon Johnson, then vice-president, was taken to see one of these villages in the neighbourhood of Agra. It was, of the several hundred thousand villages of India, the same one that Dwight D. Eisenhower had been shown a year or two before. It was impressive in its cleanliness, simple cultural life, handicrafts, and evidence of progressive agricultural techniques. Johnson, an old hand in problems of agricultural uplift and difficult to deceive, then demanded to see the adjacent village a mile or two away. After strong protesting words about its lack of preparation to receive him, he was taken there. This village, one judged, had undergone no major technical, cultural, or hygienic change in the previous thousand years.

(1979: 106–7)

21 *Mea culpa*. In the 1960s, so many of us students and other researchers were attracted to work on the (well-documented, well-organised and well-known) Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya that farmers complained about interview saturation.

Research generates more research; and investment by donors draws research after it and funds it. In India, the IADP, a programme designed to increase production sharply in a few districts which were well endowed with water, exercised a powerful attraction to research compared to the rest of India. An analysis (Harriss 1977: 30–4) of rural social science research published in the *Bombay Economic and Political Weekly* showed an astonishing concentration in IADP districts, and an almost total neglect of the very poor areas of central India. In a different way, the Comilla Project may also have misled, since Comilla District has the lowest proportion of landless of any district in Bangladesh. Research on *ujamaa* in Tanzania in the clusters of villages (the Ruvuma Development Association, Mbambara and Upper Kitete) which were among the very few in the whole country with substantial communal agricultural production, sustained the myth that such production was widespread. Research, reports and publications have given all these atypical projects high profiles, and these in turn have generated more interest, more visitors, and yet more research, reports and publications.

Fame forces project managers into public relations. More and more of their time has to be spent showing visitors around. Inundated by the celebrated, the curious, and the crass – prime ministers, graduate students, women’s clubs, farmers’ groups, aid missions, evaluation teams, school parties, committees and directors of this and that – managers set up public relations units and develop a public relations style. Visitors then get the treatment. A fluent guide follows a standard route and a standard routine. The same people are met, the same buildings entered,²² the same books signed, the same polite praise inscribed in the book against the visitors’ names. Questions are drowned in statistics; doubts inhibited by handouts. Inquisitive visitors depart loaded with research papers, technical evaluations, and annual reports which they will probably never read. They leave with a sense of guilt at the unworthy scepticism which promoted their probing questions, with memories of some of those who are better-off in the special project, and impressed by the charisma of the exceptional leader or manager who has created it. They write their journey reports, evaluations and articles on the basis of these impressions.

For their part, the project staff have reinforced through repetition the beliefs which sustain their morale; and their projects take off into self-sustaining myth. But in the myth is the seed of tragedy, as projects are driven down this path which leads, step-by-step to self-deception, pride, defensiveness, and ultimately debunking.

22 In February 1979, two British Members of Parliament visited the Anand Cooperatives in India. They saw and were impressed by the delivery of milk from small producers to one centre. Inside, hung a photograph of James Callaghan, the British Prime Minister, taken during his visit to the same centre. Asked if they would like to see a second centre they readily assented. Once inside they found another photograph, this time of the visit to that centre of Judith Hart, the British Minister of Overseas Development.

iii) Person biases

The persons with whom rural development tourists, local-level officials, and rural researchers have contact, and from whom they obtain impressions and information, are biased against poorer people.

a) *Elite bias*. 'Elite' is used here to describe those rural people who are less poor and more influential. They typically include progressive farmers, village leaders, headmen, traders, religious leaders, teachers, and paraprofessionals. They are the main sources of information for rural development tourists, for local-level officials, and even for rural researchers. They are the most fluent informants. It is they who receive and speak to the visitors; they who articulate 'the village's' interests and wishes; their concerns which emerge as 'the village's' priorities for development. It is they who entertain visitors, generously providing the expected feast or beverage. It is they who receive the lion's share of attention, advice and services from agricultural extension staff (Chambers 1974: 58; Leonard 1977: Ch. 9). It is they who show visitors the progressive practices in their fields. It is they too, who, at least at first, monopolise the time and attention of the visitor.

Conversely, the poor do not speak up. With those of higher status, they may even decline to sit down. Weak, powerless and isolated, they are often reluctant to push themselves forward. In Paul Devitt's words:

The poor are often inconspicuous, inarticulate and unorganised. Their voices may not be heard at public meetings in communities where it is customary for only the big men to put their views. It is rare to find a body or institution that adequately represents the poor in a certain community or area. Outsiders and government officials invariably find it more profitable and congenial to converse with local influentials than with the uncommunicative poor (1977: 23).

The poor are a residual, the last in the line, the most difficult to find, and the hardest to learn from: 'Unless paupers and poverty are deliberately and persistently sought, they tend to remain effectively screened from outside inquirers' (ibid.: 24).

b) *Male bias*. Most local-level government staff, researchers and other rural visitors are men. Most rural people with whom they establish contact are men. Female farmers are neglected by male agricultural extension workers. In most societies women have inferior status and are subordinate to men. There are variations and exceptions, but quite often women are shy of speaking to male visitors. And yet poor rural women are a poor and deprived class within a class. They often work very long hours, and they are usually paid less than men. Rural single women, female heads of households, and widows include many of the most wretched and unseen people in the world.

c) *User and adopter biases*. Where visits are concerned with facilities or innovations, the users of services and the adopters of new practices are more likely to be seen than are non users and non-adopters. This bias applies to

visitors who have a professional interest in, say, education, health or agriculture, to local-level officials, and to researchers. They tend to visit buildings and places where activity is concentrated, easily visible, and hence easy to study. Children in school are more likely to be seen and questioned than children who are not in school; those who use the health clinic more than those who are too sick, too poor, or too distant to use it; those who come to market because they have goods to sell or money with which to buy, more than those who stay at home because they have neither; members of the cooperative more than those who are too poor or powerless to join it; those who have adopted new agricultural, health or family planning practices more than those who have not.

d) *Active, present and living biases*. Those who are active are more visible than those who are not. Fit, happy, children gather round the jeep or Land Rover, not those who are apathetic, weak and miserable. Dead children are rarely seen. The sick lie in their huts. Inactive old people are often out of sight; a social anthropologist has recorded how he spent some time camping outside a village in Uganda before he realised that old people were starving (Turnbull 1973: 102). Those who are absent or dead cannot be met, but those who have migrated and those who have died include many of the most deprived. Much of the worst poverty is hidden by its removal.

iv) Dry season biases

Most of the poor rural people in the world live in areas of marked wet-dry tropical seasons. For the majority whose livelihoods depend on cultivation the most difficult time of the year is usually the wet season, especially before the first harvest. Food is short, food prices are high, work is hard, and infections are prevalent. Malnutrition, morbidity and mortality all rise, while body weights decline. The poorer people, women and children are particularly vulnerable. Birth weights drop and infant mortality rises. Child care is inadequate. Desperate people get indebted. This is both the hungry season and the sick season. It is also the season of poverty ratchet effects, that is, of irreversible downward movements into poverty through the sale or mortgaging of assets, the time when poor people are most likely to become poorer.

The wet season is also the unseen season. Rural visits by the urban-based have their own seasonality.

Nutritionists take care to plan
To do their surveys when they can
be sure the weather's fine and dry,
the harvest in, food intake high.

Then students seeking PhDs
Believe that everyone agrees
that rains don't do for rural study
– suits get wet and shoes get muddy.

And bureaucrats, that urban type,
wait prudently till crops are ripe,
before they venture to the field
to put their question: 'What's the yield?'

For monsoonal Asia, which has its major crop towards the end of the calendar year, it is also relevant that:

The international experts' flights
have other seasons; winter nights
In London, Washington and Rome
are what drive them, in flocks, from home.

since they then descend on India and other countries north of the equator in January and February at precisely the time of least poverty and when marriages and celebrations are to be seen and heard. Some opposite tendencies, however, deserve to be noted:

And northern academics too
are seasonal in their global view
For they are found in third world nations
mainly during long vacations.

North of the equator this means visits at the bad time of the monsoon in much of Asia and of the rains of West Africa. There are also professionals like agriculturalists and epidemiologists whose work demands rural travel during the rains, for that is when crops grow and bugs and bacteria breed.

But the disincentives and difficulties are strong. The rains are a bad time for rural travel because of the inconveniences or worse of floods, mud, landslides, broken bridges; and getting stuck, damaging vehicles, losing time, and enduring discomfort. In some places roads are officially closed. In the South Sudan, there is a period of about two months after the onset of the rains when roads are impassable but when there is not yet enough water in the rivers for travel by boat. Many rural areas, especially those which are remote and poor, are quite simply inaccessible by vehicle during the rains. The worst times of the year for the poorer people are thus those that are the least perceived by urban-based outsiders.

Once the rains are over such visitors can however travel more freely. It is in the dry season, when disease is diminishing, the harvest in, food stocks adequate, body weights rising, ceremonies in full swing, and people at their least deprived, that there is most contact between urban-based professionals and the rural poor. Not just rural development tourism, but rural appraisal generally is susceptible to a dry season bias. A manual for assessing rural needs warns of an experience when 'Once, the jeeps needed for transporting the interviewers were recalled for a month during the *few* precious months of the dry season' (Ashe 1979: 26; my emphasis). Whole institutes concentrate their field research in the dry seasons; the rains are for data analysis and writing up with a good roof over one's head. Concern to avoid inconveniencing respondents when they

are busy and exhausted with agricultural activities provides a neat justification, both practical and moral, for avoiding research during the rains. Many factors thus conspire to ensure that the poorest people are most seen at precisely those times when they are least deprived; and least seen when things are at their worst.

v) Diplomatic biases: politeness and timidity

Urban-based visitors are often deterred by combinations of politeness and timidity from approaching, meeting, and listening to and learning from the poorer people. Poverty in any country can be a subject of indifference or shame, something to be shut out, something polluting, something, in the psychological sense, to be repressed. If honestly confronted, it can also be profoundly disturbing. Those who make contact with it may offend those who are influential. The notables who generously offer hospitality to the visitor may not welcome or may be thought not to welcome, searching questions about the poorer people. Senior officials visiting junior officials may not wish to examine or expose failures of programmes intended to benefit the poor. Politeness and prudence variously inhibit the awkward question, the walk into the poorer quarter of the village, the discussion with the working women, the interviews with Harijans. Courtesy and cowardice combine to keep tourists and the poorest apart.

vi) Professional biases

Finally, professional training, values and interests present problems. Sometimes they focus attention on the less poor: agricultural extension staff trained to advise on cash crops or to prepare farm plans are drawn to the more 'progressive' farmers; historians, sociologists and administrators, especially when short of time, can best satisfy their interests and curiosity through informants among the better-educated or less poor; those engaged in family welfare and family planning work find that bases for the adoption of any new practices can most readily be established with better-off, better-educated families. But sometimes, in addition, professional training, values and interests do focus attention directly on the poor. This is especially so in the fields of nutrition and health, where those wishing to examine and to work with pathological conditions will tend to be drawn to those who are poorer.

More generally, specialisation, for all its advantages, makes it hard for observers to understand the linkages of deprivation. Rural deprivation is a web in which poverty (lack of assets, inadequate stocks and flows of food and income), physical weakness and sickness, isolation, vulnerability to contingencies, and powerlessness all mesh and interlock.²³ But professionals are trained to look for

23 For the statements in this paragraph see Longhurst and Payne (1979) and Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey (1981).

and see much less. They are programmed by their education and experience to examine what shows up in a bright but slender beam which blinds them to what lies outside it.

Knowing what they want to know, and short of time to find it out, professionals in rural areas become even more narrowly single-minded. They do their own thing and only their own thing. They look for and find what fits their ideas. There is neither inclination nor time for the open-ended question or for other ways of perceiving people, events and things. 'He that seeketh, findeth.' Visiting the same village, a hydrologist enquires about the water table, a soils scientist examines soil fertility, an agronomist investigates yields, an economist asks about wages and prices, a sociologist looks into patron-client relations, an administrator examines the tax collection record, a doctor investigates hygiene and health, a nutritionist studies diets, and a family planner tries to find out about attitudes to numbers of children. Some of these visiting professionals may be sensitive to the integrated nature of deprivation, but none is likely to fit all the pieces together, nor to be aware of all the negative factors affecting poorer people.

Specialisation prevents the case study which sees life from the point of view of the rural poor themselves; but where such case studies are written (e.g. Gulati 1981; Howes 1980; Ledesma 1977; Lewis 1959) their broader spread helps understanding and points to interventions which specialists miss. In contrast, narrow professionalism of whatever persuasion leads to diagnoses and prescriptions which underestimate deprivation by recognising and confronting only a part of the problem.

2.4 The unseen and the unknown

The argument must not be overstated. To all of these biases, exceptions can be found. There are government programmes, voluntary organisations, and research projects that seek out those who are more remote and poorer. Some projects and programmes, such as those for the weaker sections and vulnerable classes in rural India, have an anti-poverty focus. Person biases can work the other way: women's groups and women's programmes attract attention; doctors see those who are sick; nutritionists concentrate on the malnourished; agriculturalists and epidemiologists alike may have professional reasons for travel during the rains; and during an agricultural season, a daytime visit to a village may provide encounters with the sick, aged and very young, and not with the able-bodied who are out in the fields. Such exceptions must be noted. At the same time, there are dangers of underestimating the force of the biases by failing to see how they interlock and by underestimating their incidence.

The way in which spatial, project, person, dry season, politeness/timidity and professional biases interact can be seen by analysing almost any example of an urban based outsider investigating rural conditions. With many 'insights' and beliefs about rural life, the several biases can and do reinforce each other. The prosperity after harvest of a male farmer on a project beside a main road close

to a capital city may colour the perceptions of a succession of officials and dignitaries. The plight of a poor widow starving and sick in the wet season in a remote and inaccessible area may never in any way impinge on the consciousness of anyone outside her own community.

Nor are those professionals and rural staff who originate from rural areas, who have a home, second home, or farm there, or who live and work there, immune from these tendencies. Three examples can illustrate that their perceptions too can be powerfully distorted by the biases.

The first example is from a densely populated part of western Kenya. Junior agricultural extension staff and home economics workers were each given a random sample of a hundred households to survey. The households were in the area where they worked. After the survey, those who had conducted it all considered that the sample had been unfairly weighted against the more progressive and better educated households, over-representing those that were poorer. One of the agricultural staff complained that of his hundred households, only one had an exotic grade cow, and that there would have been several more if the sample had been truly representative. In reality, however, in that area there was only one exotic grade cow for every two hundred households, so each sample of hundred had only a fifty per cent chance of including one at all. A home economics worker said that she was appalled at the poverty she had encountered among her sample. On two occasions she had burst into tears at what she had found. She had not known that there was such misery in the area. 'These people,' she said, 'do not come to my meetings.'

For the same area, David Leonard (1977: 178) has documented the marked tendency for extension staff to visit progressive farmers and not to visit non-innovators (57 per cent of visits to the 10 per cent who were progressives and only 6 per cent to the 47 per cent who were non-innovators). Thus, it is not only outsiders who are affected by anti-poverty biases. Local-level rural staff are also affected, and unless there are strong countervailing incentives, they too will under-perceive deprivation in the very areas where they work.

The second example is from a study by Moore and Wickremesinghe (1980: 98) in Sri Lanka. After observing how the houses of the poor are physically hidden from the core of the villages they studied, and how public officers appear not to see them very often, Moore and Wickremesinghe noted:

Although most of the rural population ... are poor and dependent in part or whole on wage labour, one hears comments of the nature: 'Of course, most of the people around here have some job or little business in Colombo'.

The implication of such comments was that most people in the villages had other incomes and a modest well-being. This might be true of those who lived at the centres of the villages, who were better off and with whom there was contact; but it was unlikely to be true of many of those who lived on the peripheries, who were poorer, and with whom there was no contact.

In the third example, a senior official in a ministry in a capital city stated that in his rural home area no one ever went short of food. But a social anthropologist working in the area reported families seriously short of food during the annual hungry season; twice women were interviewed who said they had not eaten for three days. There was, however, food in the shops nearby, giving the impression that there was no reason for anyone to go hungry.

Perhaps this phenomenon is worldwide, as marked in rich urban as in poor rural agricultural society. Compared with others, the poor are unseen and unknown. Their deprivation is often worse than is recognised by those who are not poor.

Finally, we may note additional factors often missed by rural development tourists, local-level staff and even researchers. It is not just a case of the invisible poorer people. There are also other invisible dimensions: international influences on rural deprivation; social relations (patron-client, indebtedness, webs of obligation and exploitation); and trends over time. The very act of being in a rural area and trying to learn about it creates biases of insight and interpretation towards what can be seen; and the observer's specialisation increases the likelihood of one-sided diagnoses, explanations and prescriptions. Poor people on disaster courses may not be recognised. A nutritionist may see malnutrition but not the seasonal indebtedness, the high cost of medical treatment, the distress sales of land, and the local power structure which generate it. A doctor may see infant mortality but not the declining real wages which drive mothers to desperation, still less the causes of those declining real wages. Visibility and specialisation combine to show simple surface symptoms rather than deeper combinations of causes. The poor are little seen, and even less is the nature of their poverty understood.

3 The biases reviewed (2006)

The six biases – spatial, project, person, seasonal, diplomatic and professional – continue to manifest in many ways, and continue to interlock. To these can now be added a seventh, security bias. Whether there is a new urban bias is open to question. And to some degree offsetting all these is a new degree of understanding and acceptance that visitors may wish to visit poorer places and meet poorer people. To the original analysis there are now illustrations and qualifications; and readers will have more to contribute to what was, until the recent decline of rural visits, becoming a flourishing folklore.²⁴

24 Any reader with anecdotes and advice to add, please write to me r.chambers@ids.ac.uk and indicate whether you wish to be acknowledged as the source or prefer to be anonymous. Who knows, we might in due course be able to put together an anthology.

3.1 Spatial bias

Airport bias eluded me in the early 1980s. It may have become more common. In the late 1980s, the Chief Executive of ActionAid issued an instruction that all ActionAid growth projects had to be within four hours' drive of an airport (pers. comm. Tom Thomas). Dr Reddy, the Director of the Indian Institute of Public Administration, has noted that the location of airports is a determining factor in where research occurs (pers. comm. David Hulme). The existence of poverty and accessibility to airports interact to influence choice of location so that places which have high poverty or 'backward' indicators which are one or two hours from airports tend to get selected.

Airport and other spatial biases were evident around 1990 with the Maheshwaram watershed development programme in Andhra Pradesh, about an hour's drive from Hyderabad International Airport. This was so much visited that the staff had routinised what they called a 'two-hour treatment' and a 'four-hour treatment' for visitors. The reality in the watershed was that on the sloping land the anti-erosion works created rather than prevented erosion: stone gully plugs intended to reduce erosion instead increased it as they were bypassed and water cut into the banks; and water built up behind the irregular contour earth bunds made by bulldozers and broke through to start new gullies. Farmers, moreover, were angry at the damage done to their land without their permission: one told me that he woke up one morning to find a bulldozer making these destructive bunds on his land but he felt unable to stop it, and did not want to get on bad terms with the government.

In this watershed, though, the route on which visitors was taken followed roads on the flat land of ridges where the erosion caused by the anti-erosion works was not visible, except in one place. As an important World Bank visitor passed this place on the way in, one of the Government District staff pointed out something on the other side of the road. On the way out, the distraction was repeated as we passed it again. At no point during the four hours did the visitor see any of the extensive damage done by this World Bank-funded programme. He was, however, no naive newcomer to this sort of treatment, and repeatedly asked to meet a farmer. This proved embarrassing, time-consuming and difficult to arrange; perhaps farmers were fed up with visitors and refused to give their time, or perhaps officials judged there would be too much danger of the truth coming out, to the extent, that is, that they were themselves aware of it.

Some spatial biases, as I described them in 1983, need qualifying. *Roadside bias* remains widespread. Those who are better off still speculate in buying roadside land, and build their houses there. But sometimes the poorest people are to be found at roadsides. In famines in Ethiopia, those who are desperate often migrate to the main roads in search of relief. In his *Rural Rides*, that pioneering and polemical rural development tourist, William Cobbett, describing his horse ride from Cricklade to Cirencester in England, observed:

The labourers seem miserably poor. Their dwellings are little better than pig-beds, and their looks indicate that their food is not nearly equal to that

of a pig. Their wretched hovels are stuck upon little bits of ground *on the road side*, where the space has been wider than the road demanded ... it seems as if they had been swept off the fields by a hurricane, and had dropped and found shelter under the banks on the road side!

(Morris 1984: 21. Italics in the original)

Perhaps it was only on the public roadside that they could find any space to live on that was not private property. I have noticed a similar phenomenon in the railway reserve between Mombasa and Nairobi where very poor looking huts had been constructed between the railway line and its boundary fence.

Within cities and villages, the biases of cores persist with the poorer people often at the peripheries. But poor people can also be seen in core places. Beggars are an example, when they are not driven away. And in India, landless labourers seeking work sometimes congregate in the centre of villages in early morning to wait for those who may employ them for the day.

3.2 Project bias

This is alive and well, even though among lenders and donors projects have fallen somewhat from grace. The project subspecies *island of salvation* has proved resilient, and finds varied habitats. In the early 1980s, visiting Sukhomajri, the village in Haryana famous for its exceptionally equitable and sustainable natural resource management, I found myself in trouble because I had arrived ahead of a group of prominent visitors and taken the best guide. The plaques by the eucalyptus planted by the Sukhomajri school were a Who's Who of the agricultural establishment of India and of the World Bank. In 2003, visiting Community-Led Total Sanitation in Bangladesh, the salvation was on a literal, if seasonal, island, exceptional for its isolation and cohesive minority population. I arrived by boat just as another boat was leaving with senior staff of an INGO, and in due course signed my name after theirs in the visitors' book.

3.3 Person bias

Person bias remains strong and serious. It has been reduced by the shift in gender awareness, and a weakening in some, perhaps most societies of the barriers to women talking to visitors, especially men, though in some these remain strong or almost overwhelming.²⁵ It has also been offset by changes in diplomatic bias (see below). Questions always remain about who is being left out, and these as ever often include old people and children.

25 In May 2006 in three days of visits to rural areas outside Kabul, I was only able to have a conversation with two females. I was told that I was exceptionally privileged. I have never experienced such a spectacular male bias, or such meagre scope to offset it.

3.4 Seasonal bias

This has not diminished except to the extent that many tarmac road networks are more extensive, and to some degree where helicopters are used. They are much maligned and mocked. Much can be misperceived on their short stops. For example, arriving by helicopter, it must be easy to overlook or underestimate the degree of seasonal isolation since this is not confronted or experienced through days of difficult travel on the ground. All the same, the access they can provide to places seasonally cut off can be remarkable.

The tendency for Northerners to flock from their cold winters to warmer climates continues and is recognised in Bangladesh by calling them *sheether pakhi* – winter birds who come in January to March. Seasonally there can, too, be questions of whose convenience counts? When the Select Committee on Overseas Aid of the British House of Commons wanted to visit India in the winter, the Indian authorities requested postponement; it was inconvenient to receive visitors so near the end of their Financial Year which was 31 March. But the convenience of the MPs prevailed, and they too visited at what for many poor people in rural India was their least bad time of year – cool, dry, relatively healthy and after harvest.

3.5 Diplomatic bias

This is still there, but has to a degree been offset. The widespread rhetoric on poverty has made it more acceptable in many countries and regions for a visitor to ask to go to the poorest villages or slums, or the poorest part of a village or slum or to meet poorer people. Even here, though, there can be a person bias, of a new sort; the poor people met may be practised, rehearsed and reliable performers, as I have experienced with at least one women's organisation. And in one Indian village, it was the same *Dalit*, with the same milch buffalo supplied through the Integrated Rural Development Programme, who was paraded to a succession of visitors to whom he dutifully explained the benefits he and his family had gained from that misperceived and overrated programme.²⁶

3.6 Professional bias

This remains powerful, but the multidimensionality of poverty is better recognised. The vocabulary of development common to disciplines has expanded to more often include words like vulnerability, marginalisation, exclusion,

26 The IRDP was subject to innumerable questionnaire evaluations which were shown by Jean Dreze (1990) in a devastating, detailed and entirely credible article to have built in positive biases while participant observers in villages often found the programme did more harm than good. Subsequently, attempts were made to rectify some of the worst defects of the programme, but I doubt whether these went far to offset the deep flaws of concept and implementation.

discrimination, gender, powerlessness, rights, and social justice. The widely adopted sustainable livelihoods framework has provided common neutral ground on which professions and disciplines can meet, and has broadened professional perspectives, including as it does the five capitals – natural, physical, human, social and financial, and also processes and institutions.

To these original six security bias can now be added, and questions can be asked whether there is a new urban bias.

3.7 Security bias

As pointed out by David Hirschmann (2003: 488), this is probably becoming more important in development work. Considerations of security discourage or exclude visits to areas where the visitor might not be safe. The cumulative effect of this exclusion is that visitors lack experience of being personally insecure, and may fail to appreciate what physical insecurity means to many poor people and the priority many accord to peace and civil order.

Security can be a legitimate concern of hosts. It can also be a convenient excuse for denying access to an area or a group of people. I believe this has been used to prevent me staying in villages overnight, when the real reasons have been the trouble involved and other concerns, however considerate, about food and toilet.

A subset of security bias concerns sickness. When in the 1970s, it was suggested that every donor official should be exposed to and learn about rural life and especially rural poverty by spending two weeks in every year actually living in a village, a senior UN official objected on the grounds of the health risks to his staff (Chambers 1978). In 2003, when a serious form of malaria broke out in part of Gujarat where SEWA was organising immersions for World Bank staff and others, the visitors were diverted to another area unaffected by the outbreak. This cannot have been an easy decision. The issues here are not simple, but they need to be recognised, confronted and the trade-offs seriously assessed.

3.8 Urban bias?

Whether there is a new urban bias is open to question. It can be asked whether with less time for visits of any sort those who make them now go to urban more than rural areas. Urban slums and squatter settlements are more accessible, especially during rains. Urban visits may be more convenient, easier to arrange, easier to cancel, and above all take less time. On the other hand, what is close by can be more threatening, and more habitually shut out. Of donor agency staff a well informed observer has written:

I know very few who have ventured into urban slums – fear of something on their own back doorstep seems even greater – *perhaps I'll be recognised and pestered?* It is less easy to put out of mind ... (pers. comm. Dee Jupp)

There is nothing final about this listing. Biases are many, and they change. At least as important as offsetting those named, is the practice of being critically aware and reflecting on what is happening on a visit, of what is being seen, shown and said, of what is not being seen, shown or said, and how this limits or distorts the reality perceived. Each actor can examine their own experience and identify and try to offset biases and enjoy doing so. For it is not just important; it also generates good stories to be told against oneself, and helps us to take ourselves less seriously than we take our work.

4 An agenda for action

4.1 Get out, visit, and offset the biases

The decline in rural visits by urban-based professionals is lamentable and demands resolute reversal. Both rural and urban visits will always be vital ways of keeping in touch and up-to-date with people, conditions and change. The biases should not be a reason for avoiding visits but a reason for striving to do them more and make them better.

There are many ways to offset the biases and to achieve insightful experiences. ‘Old hands’ like President Lyndon Johnson (see footnote 21) have known some of these. Some also involve decisive and undiplomatic interventions. It can be tempting to take the easier option of going politely with the flow. Especially when there have been no preliminary exchanges about a visit, it can be rude and embarrassing to alter what has been arranged; and if people in communities have been warned of a visit, and barring compelling reasons, it is unethical not to go to them as planned. To avoid these and other traps, here are some commonsense ideas of what can be done:

Send messages in advance

Some of the options are:

- *Make your purpose and hopes clear.* This is both obvious and two-sided. The down side may be that clarity may deter hosts from good activities that they know about and you do not.
- *Indicate your hope for informality and willingness to ‘rough it’.*
- *Avoid the VIP circuit.* Indicate that you prefer to avoid communities which are on a VIP circuit and are frequently visited. If you are presented with a visitor’s book to sign, you will probably have failed on this count.²⁷ Whatever you say, a case may be made that there is a special innovation that you should see and be aware of. If so, it is best to balance this by asking for time and space for unscheduled visits elsewhere.

- *Consider avoiding lunch.* Formal arrangements for this often superfluous meal can be tiresome for hosts, complicate itineraries, limit the time spent seeing, listening and learning, and again and again curtail visits. If there are bananas, you can say bananas are fine. Or at most sandwiches, samosas or their local equivalents.²⁸ But use your judgement on this. Lunch can provide opportunities for conversations otherwise denied; in three days of field visits near Kabul in May 2006, I was able to have only one conversation with a woman. She was a Social Organiser. In the open she wore a full burka, and I had no idea who she was. Once seated in a curtained off area for lunch, she removed the cover to reveal an animated and enthusiastic woman with whom I was able to have a fascinating talk. Without lunch, I would have missed this privilege, so rare, I was told, for a male visitor in Afghanistan.²⁹
- *Ask for time for just wandering around.* This request is often not effective, but making it establishes the point that you want this, and puts a foot in the door even if it does not always open it. In a community outside Kabul, a spare hour after the formal meeting was invaluable for meeting some of the poorer people.
- *Ask that no programme be prearranged.* This, too, may not work. I have made the request and arrived to be courteously presented with a detailed itinerary to people who would be waiting for me. As an officer of the Indian Administrative Service Anil C. Shah (pers. comm.) was able to avoid this. When visiting an area he would choose on a map where to go, and pick a village which was far to reach. Arriving unexpectedly, his findings were stark, revealing and embarrassing for the local staff.

27 This applies mainly to special communities, farmers, groups and projects. Some schools have visitors' books as a matter of course, and not because they are special. If it is any consolation to the reader, despite efforts to take my own advice, I still find myself signing several visitors' books a year.

28 Misunderstandings over lunch may be common and hosts' courtesy can be misplaced. Hosts can have their own ideas and priorities. To avoid the hours taken to reach the lunch place, wait for the meal, eat it, and get going again, a visiting team once asked for sandwiches. However, the next day they still lost the same time travelling to an Inspection Bungalow for lunch. The only difference was that they all had sandwiches there instead of the preferable local food (pers. comm. Rosalind Eyben). As a lover of Indian food, I was distressed once in Andhra Pradesh to be faced by a lunch of dry bread and hard boiled eggs (? my supposed national dish) while my hosts dug into a good curry. For politeness to prevail over palate required an English stiff upper lip.

29 Penny Lawrence, on reading this paper, pointed out that foreign female visitors in strongly patriarchal cultures are usually treated as 'honorary males' and have access to both men and women, while men are limited to men only. This underlines the importance of gender balance, or a majority of women, among visiting teams.

Reflect and offset during a visit

Reflect critically on how the biases are affecting perception and learning, and try to offset them. A longer personal list is better, but some of the more important are:

- Spatial and project: where is being visited and what seen, and where is not being visited and not seen?
- Person: who is being met, seen and heard and who not met, seen and heard – women, children, the sick, the very old, migrants, those who are busy, non-users of services, the marginalised and excluded?
- Seasonal: what are things like at other times of the year?
- Diplomatic: what questions are not being asked, where are you not going, whom are you not meeting because of politeness or timidity? Are you striking a good balance between being culturally and gender sensitive?
- Professional: what are you predisposed to notice and ask about, and not to notice or ask about?
- Security: are insecure areas, and people who are insecure, being excluded?

A few practical tips

- *Take it in turns 'to wear the tie'.* This came from a USAID staff member. When visiting as a team, they would take it in turns to be the important person who received the first garland, met the notables, sat at the table, and made the speech. While this was going on, other members of the team took the opportunity to wander around.
- *Use local and unconventional transport.* Four-wheel drive vehicles carry a culture and convey signals of alien separateness and superiority. Bicycles are brilliant, and can sometimes be hired or borrowed in villages, especially in South Asia. Horses can reach further places faster than walking.³⁰ Local buses and bicycle rickshaws (in South Asia) have much to recommend them. Nor, as mentioned above, should helicopters be sneered at. They can dramatically offset spatial biases, even though they cannot give the full feel or experience of remoteness and isolation. In the Ethiopian famine of 1984 they helped reveal the plight of remote communities. Rajiv Gandhi when Prime Minister of India made unannounced visits to inaccessible tribal communities in central India and one imagines may have been able to listen

30 In 1958, the first question I recollect my District Commissioner asking me on arrival in Samburu District in Kenya was 'Can you ride?'. Much of my first years in development were then spent on horseback. Horses gave access to many people and areas that could not be reached by vehicle. They were much faster than walking. And aesthetically they were much closer to, and more part of, the natural and human environment than a vehicle.

to the local people without the normal high pressure preparations and interventions of squadrons of officials.

- *Allow an extra day.* Plan in an unplanned day during which you can indeed wander around. This can be as good as it is difficult to justify to those with normal mindsets and bureaucratic reflexes and who ought to know better. If you are old, you can say you need to rest.

Other suggestions for learning about and from, those most likely to be excluded come from David Hirschmann (2003), drawing on experience of working within the time and other constraints of being a consultant. 'Three week consultancies', he writes, 'are possibly the most unpromising of circumstances for effective, people-centred, empowering development work' (ibid.: 488). He is at pains not to justify hurried work but recognises that there are practical things which can be done. Three he gives for including the excluded are:

- *Use rhetorical space.* Making use of donor rhetoric of participation, gender, poverty and so on to open up spaces to give voice to, listen to and learn more about those who are poorer and more excluded, not least women.
- *Reinterpret information.* Taking account of the 'unseen', those not included in survey and other data, and considering who has been left out and why and what needs to be done to have them included.
- *Turn the room around.* Tactfully changing patterns of seating, meeting and interaction. 'Seating patterns may represent differences in class, race, gender, ethnicity, education and/or levels of confidence ... changing, or at least breaking through, pre-arranged patterns requires some diplomacy and politeness, and/or a willingness to stress interest in hearing all views and waiting through the likely embarrassed and embarrassing silence.' Separate meetings with women, and more time for them to exert influence are sometimes necessary.

This last must be underlined. Not only are women often absent or marginalised in meetings, but it is harder for them to find blocks of time, or even places, for meeting undisturbed. The principle of 'Ask them' applies: to ask them the most convenient time and place *for them*. For rural women in South Asia this is frequently the least convenient time for 'us': after dark, when all their duties are done. And they can show astonishing stamina by continuing their meetings after midnight.

A gender balance is usually vital in any group or team visiting rural areas. This is precisely hardest in those societies where women are most subjugated; in only one of three days of field visits from Kabul in May 2006 did we have a woman in the party who was able to talk to women's groups! And for men to talk to them was utterly out of the question. During these three days I was only able to have a conversation with two females. I was told that I was exceptionally privileged. I have never experienced such a spectacular male bias, or such meagre scope to offset it.

To conclude, offsetting the various biases can be lived as fun. Being aware of how one is trapped can lead to wry smiles and can also be taken as a challenge for inventive improvisation. Quite often, the experiences that follow can lead to learning, both about process and about rural or urban realities. Sometimes, they provide stories and jokes to share with colleagues. At all costs, awareness of the limitations of brief visits should not deter but encourage development professionals to go where poor people are, to meet them, to collect and share experiences, and learn to do this better. And all of us who are practitioners or victims of development tourism, whether rural or urban, can develop our own ideas for good practice.

My own favourite is advice from the *Alpine Journal*. Designed for ski mountaineering, this applies to much else in life, and equally, if not more, to rural and urban visits:

Start early
Don't rush
Think!

4.2 Antidotes: direct learning and immersions

In the 1990s, direct learning through taking part in Rapid Rural Appraisal (Khon Kaen 1987) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1997) activities was sometimes transformative for officials and other outsiders in the insights they gained. Policymakers and district officials when included in RRA or PRA teams, and later in teams involved in Participatory Poverty Assessments, sometimes experienced quite dramatic changes of view (Freudenberger 1998; Cathy Shutt pers. comm.).

In addition to RRA and PRA, in the mid 2000s, alternative forms of direct learning are being invented, adopted and spread, and more and more variants can be expected. All entail and provide opportunities for direct face-to-face, person-to-person, learning by outsiders. Three can illustrate some of the range; UNHCR's annual participatory assessments with refugees; SDC's views of the poor in Tanzania; and other forms of immersion.

4.2.1 UNHCR's participatory assessments

After three critical independent evaluations found that UNHCR staff did not have enough contact with their people of concern (refugees and internally displaced people), worked in a fragmented manner, and did not adequately address issues of age, gender and diversity, major restructuring took place. One part of this was piloting, and then adopting organisation-wide, an annual week-long participatory assessment, in September–October, to fit in with the budget cycle. In these participatory assessments, the intention is that all staff in a country should go together to the field to meet, listen to and learn from the people of concern. Facilitators were trained to carry out training for

mainstreaming age, gender and diversity.³¹ An evaluation (Groves 2005) found that although there was an extra work burden and that few senior management participated, the participatory assessment was seen to be an ‘extremely positive and useful tool in that it brings staff closer to the realities of the people of concern’. The increased contact had led to changes in attitudes and analytical approaches on the part of UNHCR staff and their partners. In the words of one staff member:

There has been a big effect for me personally and for the implementing partners that I work with. Before, we knew that there were differences between sex and age groups but we didn’t realise to what extent. There has been a total change in implementing partners’ attitudes.

4.2.2 SDC’s views of the poor ³²

In 2002, SDC in Tanzania conducted a study primarily to strengthen the poverty focus of its new country programme for Tanzania. Staff of SDC and partners received training and orientation for participatory research, and then each of them, twice, spent a full day with a very poor family, without notebooks, living and working with them. This brief but intense immersion, even without an overnight, gave powerful insights and made deep personal impacts:

I could not believe that the family only had one broken hoe to cultivate with. It was like trying to dig with a teaspoon. I will never forget that.

The image of the baby crying all day with hunger will always be with me.

I’ve worked in rural villages for more than twenty years, but I have never had an experience like this.

Even village leaders could not tell you what we experienced for ourselves.

We heard the untold stories. It was an eye-opener as families shared their problems that would never be aired in group meetings. They treated us like confidantes.

The insights gained included that poor people gave higher priority to their shelter and housing than had been thought, and that they could not know

31 See *Facilitator’s Guide for the Workshop on Participatory Assessment in Operations: Age, Gender and Diversity Analysis* (UNHCR 2006).

32 The sources for this section are *SDC Views of the Poor* (2003) and *Jupp Views of the Poor: Some Thoughts...* (2004) (see references). The latter is subtitled ‘Some thoughts on how to involve your own staff to conduct quick, low cost but insightful research into poor people’s perspective’. The training and the participatory research were led by Dee Jupp.

about services provided free by the state. The outcomes of this participatory research include photographs taken by poor people which later were exhibited in Bern. The main benefit, though, was personal experiential learning, and its contribution to SDC planning and priorities.

4.2.3 Immersions with overnights³³

A widely recommended antidote to some of the biases is staying overnight in or near communities. Camping near communities was routine practice for many colonial and imperial administrators; they were outsiders, near, but not in, communities, and also disadvantaged by their powerful and official position.³⁴ In contrast, staying in communities as a guest, as a person, and not as an official or bringer of benefits, opens up a different range of experiences and insights. For one thing, much changes after dark. People relax and talk more freely. There is no rush to finish off and leave. There is less awareness of the difference of the visitor. People talk about other things – family and relationships, what matters to them, and subjects otherwise too sensitive like corruption, exploitation, local conflicts, and the wider world ... the guest (I am no longer using the word ‘outsider’) is less likely to be treated prudently and fed chosen words and information. The overnight stay is subject to its own pressures – to stay not with a poor family but with one which is better off, which community members themselves may feel to be appropriate; or to camp in the school, or in a tent outside the village; or not to stay in the community at all but to put up at a nearby government rest house. The decent reflexes of hospitality on the part of those organising a visit for the stranger deserve to be respected, but can also be politely but firmly resisted.

The essence of the immersion with overnights is that the visitor is not an important person but a fellow human being and can become a friend. She or he spends nights living in a community, taking part and helping in life, and experiencing and learning as a participant. There are many forms of immersion and many ways of arranging them. They can be spontaneous, on an impulse or seizing an opportunity; but more usually they are prepared and facilitated as reflective experiences.

33 For an overview, see Eyben (2004). For reviews of approaches and practical and ethical issues, and for other sources, see Irvine *et al.* (2004 and 2006). A report of an ActionAid International Pilot Immersion in Northern Ghana is available from d.donlan@ids.ac.uk. For an overview, see Eyben (2004). For information on immersions organised for development professionals by ActionAid International, see AAI (2006) or contact immersions@actionaid.org. In 2006, these are being organised in China, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda, following facilitators’ training in Sierra Leone.

34 Some administrators used their position to get quite close to the people among whom they worked and came to understand and appreciate their cultures. See, for example, Leonard Woolf, *The Village in the Jungle* (2005) about life in rural Ceylon. Woolf was for a time the District Administrator in Hambantota District. The records of his time there are likely to have been destroyed by the tsunami.

Immersion has been pioneered, adopted and promoted in varied forms (Eyben 2004; Irvine *et al.* 2004, 2006). For social anthropologists, they have long been professional practice. In recent decades, four organisations and forms of immersion stand out: the Exposure and Dialogue experiences, initiated and inspired by Karl Osner, in which typically groups of senior officials and politicians together have a period of orientation, a few days staying with a host family, and then a time of individual and joint reflection (Osner 2004); the VIP (Village Immersion Programme) and GRIP (Grassroots Immersion Programme) (the South Asian form) initiated by James Wolfensohn for senior officials of the World Bank; the immersions of SEWA (the Self Employed Women's Association) in India, institutionalised so that newly recruited staff spend time living with SEWA members as part of their induction and orientation; and the immersions being organized in 2006 by ActionAid International (AAI 2006).

These AAI immersions, after pilot testing, have been designed as week-long facilitated learning workshops, intended primarily for the staff of aid agencies and governments. They present organised and accessible opportunities to offset the biases of rural development tourism. For those who wish, they open up ways to break out of the headquarters and capital traps. They provide opportunities for direct experiential learning. They invalidate any argument that immersions cannot be undertaken because they are not available or difficult to arrange.

The benefits of immersions are repeatedly affirmed and illustrated by the reflections of those who have experienced them. Relating experience to vision, the observation of an official of an international aid agency has striking implications:

I have asked myself what would have happened if I had spent one week per year in a village somewhere over the last decade ... ten different contexts, and a number of faces and names to have in mind when reading, thinking, writing, taking decisions and arguing in our bureaucracy.

The question now is not how an organisation can afford the time and other resources for immersions for its staff. It is how, if it is seriously pro-poor, it can possibly not do so. Immersions do indeed appear cost-effective ways of enhancing the realism and effectiveness of pro-poor policy and practice and reducing the risk of gross errors. And this in turn, discharges responsibility and accountability both upwards to funders and taxpayers, and downwards to poor people themselves.

There are questions here of the traps of mindsets, orientations and assumptions. This paper while criticising a top-down, centre-outwards, perspective, has itself taken one. The challenge is to use this to turn perspectives on their head, to see things from a different frame, from the point of view of people themselves who live in poverty. Reacting to a draft of this paper and the traps it describes, Koy Thomson, who could speak from his own experience including a recent immersion in Northern Ghana, wrote:

The more important trap is a mental one – how do you get people to lay aside for a short while their prejudices and perspectives and simply be with and be open?

And his comment, quoted at the head of this paper, bears repeating:

It would be nice if something could be included from a member of the community – perhaps expressing their amazement that people who are experts in poverty don't even bother to spend time with them.

In 2006, immersions may be near a tipping point. The OECD's review of the United Kingdom's development aid (OECD 2006) points in this direction. It says:

The Review team would also encourage staff currently working in headquarters to spend more time visiting the field and country office staff to spend more time out of capital cities. Greater efforts should be made in getting key staff closer to the development realities they support.

But institutional, personal and professional barriers remain. Perhaps the most pervasive is pressure on time. An email from a staff member of a bilateral aid agency who is enthusiastic about a personal immersion says 'There is always a tidal wave of things going on in our environment that makes it difficult to follow through with something like organising immersions'. The response has to be that this is a question of perceptions and priorities for those in the organisation who seek to maximise effectiveness.

If the arguments of this paper are right, the needs are greater now than ever. The opportunities are also increasing. Aid agencies allocate time for professional development, though staff may not always know their entitlements. And even when they do know, there are easy rationalisations for inertia – 'I can see that others need it, but I don't', 'I would like to go but I would have difficulty justifying it with my boss', 'I am simply too busy to take out a whole week', 'Even if I decided to go, the chances are that something would happen to make me cancel'. The challenge is to turn these on their heads to become 'I need to test the experience for myself and learn so that I can tell others', 'The best way to justify this is to invite my boss to come and find out for himself/herself', 'Being too busy means I am deprived of experiential learning, and the more I miss and lack it, the more it matters' and 'To cancel would be unethical because the host community and family have prepared and are expecting me'.

We will always need continuous learning about immersions, how they can enhance the quality and effectiveness of what we do in development, and how they can be done better. And they are not a magic wand or panacea. But we already know enough to justify their widespread promotion and adoption. The question is whether in a few years time, little will have changed; or whether a spread of immersions, practiced, encouraged and rewarded by those in senior positions, will have seeded a progressive transformation of insight, understanding and relevance for pro-poor policy and practice. That in turn depends on whether there are enough people at different levels – in aid agencies, INGOs, government departments, research institutes and other organisations – to make

immersions happen, recognising them as crucial for all who strive to be aware, in touch and up-to-date as development professionals.

In advocating immersions, I do not posture as 'holier than thou'. All like me who argue for them are challenging themselves to do what they say and make them a regular practice. As so often, good change depends on the vision, guts, and tenacity of individual actors. It needs champions who make and defend space for immersions for themselves and for others. It needs more and more proactive professionals who swim against the tidal wave and assert themselves against the inertia of the easy and the normal. It needs more and more who recognise the value of learning experientially with poor communities and people, and linked with all this, a redefinition of what it takes to be responsible as a pro-poor professional.

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