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Extract from immersion report: Funsi, Ghana

by KOY THOMSON

This article is the first of three written by participants in the same immersion in Ghana in 2005, facilitated by ActionAid International and its local partner, Tudridep. The immersion took place in a village called Funsi, in the Upper West region of the country. This was a pivotal immersion for ActionAid in that it cemented the organisation's thinking about the particular model of immersion it would pursue (which Sonya Ruparel described earlier in Section 1).

The author describes the vulnerability he felt during the immersion, and the uncertainty of his status – echoing what Dee Jupp wrote in Section 2 about how downplaying the status and identity of guests is an important part of enabling them to come closer to their hosts. He shows how his time in Funsi both challenged and reinforced his thinking about rights-based approaches and advocacy.[1]

As I write, I imagine Uhuru is in the bush, on his farm. Pacing between the yam mounds and corn ridges. I hope they are fat with produce. I hope the partridges have not scratched up the maize seeds, and that Uhuru is fit and free from snakebites and scorpion stings. Uhuru and his brother Alan-hansa once asked me to resolve their long-running argument about whether the world rotates. I tried to explain as best I could with the aid of a lantern, my fist, and a great deal of bluff. But beneath a brilliant canopy of stars and planets, the conversation soon veered off onto other astronomical matters. Uhuru's curiosity and wonder at the world, the burden of his extended family's survival, and the occasional glimpses of youthful behaviour (gratuitously and accurately catapulting the goats) reminded me of what a vulnerable young man he is, and I wanted to get to know him more.

'I suppose it is nice to have the luxury of 4 days in a village doing nothing.' This was one (not untypical) response to my immersion in Funsi. For a development organisation to see 4 days simply being with people living with poverty as a luxury is a sign of pathology. Being busy, doing things, never deviating from the 'plan', creates a self-referential universe which organisations need never leave. It is OK to draw the village into that universe by doing something useful, perhaps a review or an investigation, something

[1] A rights-based approach to poverty reduction is based on the belief that poverty is a consequence of the denial and violation of human rights. Every human being has a set of rights which their governments are obliged to promote and protect. A rights-based approach involves empowering people to claim the rights to which they are entitled under international and national human rights law.

Koy sorting cards of participant's expectations.

Photo: Koy Thompson

A family prepares the evening meal.

Photo: ActionAid

professional or expert – but God forbid, doing nothing!

Let me celebrate doing nothing. But first let me qualify that. My teenage son does loads of doing nothing and I am not celebrating that. I am talking about doing nothing in order to unlearn. Why unlearn? Because unlearning is a state of mind that encourages critical thinking and openness. Because to unlearn, you have to drop your professional defences, the position of power you have over other people by virtue of your money, knowledge, experience, and status, and become vulnerable. Only then can you experience how the business of reviews, investigations, and enquiries is a thick plate of defensive glass that encloses you in what is known, and prevents you from experiencing… perhaps, something else.

As I write this I am listening to Studs Terkel, the great journalist and documenter of 'uncelebrated people's' lives, who says too that to be able to listen to people it is important to be vulnerable in that relationship, ideally to place yourself in a position of inferiority. In an immersion, with your uncertain status (no-one really knows what you are doing there, but you're clearly not behaving like a normal outsider) you can share in one layer of village life. It certainly helps looking lost, repeatedly goofing your local *Pasale* greetings, joining in the work, and being dependent on your hosts for every basic need.[2] As I say, this is just one layer, but stay attentive, chat and gossip idly, and other layers poke through – sad and ugly tales of young girls snatched into marriage, or happy tales of instant and enduring life.

The family caring for me lived in a tin-roofed L-shaped house. In the family I only really got to know Uhuru's brother, who was a teacher and spoke English. His wife and mother stuck to greetings, so I didn't really push things. I could tell from the food that I was being treated as a special guest. My hosts let me eat in my room, which gave me plenty of time to feel guilty about eating so well in the lean season and eating before I had sweated (that is, eating without working). But over the days the boundaries eroded so that I was squatting by the fire in the morning, grubbing at leftovers. I also did not impose upon other boundaries. A young girl strained every morning with a bucket for my bath and I let her do it, although I would have been much more comfortable doing it myself.

Uhuru's farm was about one hour's cycle ride into the forest. Without cattle for ploughing, his fields have literally been cut by hand from the bush. We spent the day weeding – although for Uhuru it was minute-by-minute risk assessment and management: what plant is not doing well (pull up and replace), what bit of ground might be too wet or dry (interplant either corn or rice – if one fails because the moisture is wrong, the other will do well), how much are the partridges taking (dig new furrows), which mounds are doing well (shove beans or okra in). Risk is the big difference between my brother-in-law's farm in Devon and Uhuru's farm in Ghana. Uhuru has a three-month growing season but my brother-in-law has winter and summer crops. In the UK there are farming subsidies and pretty good social-economic security (health, schooling, pensions, income support, and other social insurance). Foot and Mouth (an animal disease) was catastrophic, but nobody died. On Uhuru's farm there is a very real possibility that the damage caused by the partridges could set off a chain of events that results in the death of a child.

[2] The dialect of the *Sissali* language spoken in this area is called *Pasale*.

It is curious how much the immersion is becoming a mirror onto my own life and my own family. And it is not only because the many people that I meet want to talk about my family, or that I know that my family will ask me a lot about the family I stayed with in Ghana. Perhaps it is because I am simply living with people and not treating them as objects for study or planning, seeing them through the lens of some outsider's intervention, or honing my own expertise.

Not doing anything is also like a magic charm that lets you escape from 'Aidland'. 'Aidland', as we know, is a parallel world, which runs to different social, cultural, and political rules. 'Aidland' does have a dark side, which was strikingly manifest in Funsi. More than once in village meetings or private conversations we heard the strong sentiment that 'only the white man brings good things'. Aid dependency is perhaps nothing new, but the truly alarming perversity in Funsi is that a fancy District Assembly for the people's representatives is sited there. An Aid culture that directly or indirectly reinforces the idea that only the white man brings good things is undermining the development of a proper relation between the people and their representatives, and thus destroying hopes of accountable governance and the rights needed to end poverty before they are out of the starting gate. Even worse, the representatives I talked to were actually hungry to know how to develop their roles and how to interact with communities in a participatory way. Sustained popular education on human rights and of the role of the District Assembly, coupled with much better participatory planning and analysis around the District Plans, would make a huge difference.

Rights-based approaches to social development have at least brought these issues to the fore. But reflecting on how hard Uhuru and his wife work and the risky and vulnerable lives they lead, I realised that much rights work is highly fragmented, the rights claimed being hostage to the narrow experience of outsiders and their sectoral interests and priorities. In addition, even successful campaigns that secure important assets, such as land or perhaps piped water, may be couched in the language of rights, but this does not mean that any of the players involved have any clear notion of what claims people rightly have or should have. It is not necessarily correct that in charitable, service-led approaches outsiders decide and people passively accept what they can get, and that in rights-based approaches people themselves decide, organise, struggle, and claim. It is quite possible, for example, to have a service-led approach to claims and advocacy. The difference lies in a deeper understanding about the duties and responsibilities of those holding power, clarity about what human rights mean in concept, policy, and practice, and the awakening within people of the abuses of power against them and their own potential to do something about it. Before coming to Funsi I had made a pitch to ActionAid International to develop a campaign for Universal Socio-Economic Protection, and even though there are real resource constraints in Ghana in general, and Funsi in particular, my experience in Funsi has reinforced my view.

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One of my expectations of the immersion was to 'unlearn'. But I realised that you cannot really report what you 'unlearnt'. Unlearning is not a happening but an attitude of mind. For me, at least, the immersion was a safe and secure place to be allowed to let go, open out, and be vulnerable. For if you can't do that how can you listen, value what you hear, and notice what the hell is going on?

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