



# Aidlink facilitated Immersion Programme: An overview

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*'Every person in Ireland will have access to educational opportunities to understand their rights and responsibilities as global citizens as well as their potential to affect change for a more just and equal world'*

White Paper on Irish Aid (2006)

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### **What is an immersion programme?**

An immersion programme is a form of experiential development education which sees students from the so-called developed world 'immersed' in the culture and day-to-day life of host communities in the developing world. The hosts are partner schools, congregations and NGOs who facilitate and support the visit.

Students are afforded the opportunity to share and partake in the daily lives of their host community and attend school with their peers. Students are engaged in a development education experience which sees them gain invaluable exposure to, and an awareness of: the local culture, traditions and society and also the challenges faced by communities. It creates a space whereby the Irish students' existing perceptions and attitudes of the developing world may be challenged.

### **Aidlink and Development Education**

[Aidlink](#) is an Irish international development organisation that works to improve the lives of people living in poverty in Uganda, Kenya and Ghana. Aidlink is committed to empowering local communities to directly implement development actions; to advocate for the relief of poverty and increase access to basic services; water, primary health care, education and food security. Aidlink's partnership approach to development promotes local communities and organisations to manage their own development. Each programme is designed in consultation with local stakeholders, managed by local partner organisations and involves capacity building and continued monitoring to ensure sustainability.

Aidlink has worked in international development for over 30 years and since inception, development education has been a fundamental element of Aidlink's work as stated in the original Memorandum and Articles of Association (1982);

*'Aidlink is committed to informing people, especially the young, of the causes and realities of poverty with an explicit focus on developing countries'*

To this day, fostering development education in Irish secondary schools by promoting an understanding of the causes of poverty and inequality in the world remains a core element of Aidlink's work. Aidlink is a consortium member of [developmenteducation.ie](http://developmenteducation.ie), an online educational resource.

### **Added value of an Aidlink facilitated immersion programme**

*"Having Aidlink facilitate our trip has opened up so much more than we could ever achieve on our own. Aidlink's long experience in Africa brings a richness to this project that is hard to quantify, but, definitely doors have been opened to us to give us access to African life"*

Mrs. Maighread Mhic Dhomhnaill, Principal, Seamount College, Kinvara, Co. Galway

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A core value of the immersion programme is partnership and relationship building. First Aidlink and the host school build a partnership, followed by a school-to-school partnership, creating the opportunity for student engagement. The unique nature of an Aidlink facilitated immersion programme stands out among those of its contemporaries; rather than going to 'help', 'give' or 'fix' students go to 'be', 'see', 'experience' and learn.

This is an education programme with a learner centred approach and is embedded in schools with a focus on Irish students going to school with their peers in the developing world. Anecdotal evidence suggests for some Irish students, participation in the programme instigates a first step of asking critical questions and prompts consideration of their own potential role in promoting social justice be it at their home, school, parish, local community level or beyond.

Aidlink has a wealth of direct experience in designing and delivering immersion programmes. Aidlink has a proven capacity to facilitate all necessary practical planning, administration and logistics for immersion trips with proven strong health and safety standards. From the first programme in 2004 where 10 students from one Dublin school engaged in the Aidlink facilitated immersion programme the partnership has flourished and the programme has grown exponentially with over 60 students and a leadership team travelling to Ghana in 2014.

### **Programme outline**

#### *Participants*

Participating students are in their senior cycle of secondary school. In the main students will have completed C.S.P.E, a course in citizenship education, in the junior cycle and some aspect of development education continued into their senior cycle learning.

A leadership team travels with the students; this team is usually made up of teachers and an Aidlink representative with clear roles and responsibilities outlined. The Aidlink representative will have experience of living and working in Africa and will have worked with the participants during a pre-departure programme.

#### *Pre-departure and preparation*

The immersion programme extends beyond the immersion *trip* to the developing world and preparation is key to the success of the programme. Students are engaged in pre-departure country specific briefings in advance of the actual visit.

#### *In-country*

*"I felt so privileged and lucky to be there [Ayayo, Ghana] in an environment that I'd only read about or seen in photographs. I met people that were so vibrant and happy, but were struggling so much with things that I can take for granted like food, water and healthcare"*

Irish student, Ghana Immersion 2011

The immersion itself, generally up to two weeks in duration includes; 'students being students' and going to school for one full week in secondary school, attending normal classes and participating in extracurricular school activities such as sport and entertainment. Students are placed in a class corresponding to their class in Ireland and attend regular class with their African peers, taught by African teachers. Students of very different cultures find common ground in the familiar classroom set up. This 'learning by doing' creates an awareness of the local culture, traditions and society and also the challenges faced by communities.

The students probably learn most from each other and host communities grab the opportunity to educate their peers in the positive things that are happening at their community and national level covering topics from education: to governance: to emigration and also the very real challenges their communities and government face. There is mutual learning as students are generally open, frank and honest with each other with a freedom on both sides to ask any questions they may have. Past experience has seen solidarity and respect grow between the two sets of schools and students.

The second week is school specific and planned with the school leadership team: for example one school facilitates an after school English language programme with primary school students. Other programmes have included visiting places of national and cultural interest and/or some programme exposure visits.

#### *Return*

*“It is our greatest wish that our friendship will grow from strength to strength through communication and visits from both schools...This will help foster the unity between the two schools”*

Ghanaian student, Ghana Immersion 2011

The programme has seen development education become embedded or enhanced as part of a school's values, ethos and/or core curriculum. On return to Ireland the students share learning among the wider school community, parents and families, local churches and primary schools etc. through workshops, exhibitions and fundraising activities.

Following the immersion and confronted with a reality of the developing world, it is envisaged the students have acquired some understanding of the multi-faceted nature of poverty incorporating the political, economic, social and environmental. Students are encouraged to critically reflect on their experience, often challenging their attitude towards the developing world and explore their potential to harness change.

One programme has come full circle with reciprocal visits.

#### **Cost**

Aidlink with school leadership will draft a budget tailored to a group's needs. Costs are divided into pre-departure and in-country costs. Examples of pre-departure costs include: flights, insurance, visa, vaccinations and malaria prophylaxis. Examples of in-country costs include: transport, accommodation, food and water. Typically families self-fund the pre-departure expenses and in-country costs, or the latter too can be fundraised transparently.

Fundraising for Aidlink development projects is a feature of the programme: the school community are encouraged to organise fundraising events to fund Aidlink projects in Africa focused on the reduction of poverty through the realisation of basic needs; water, health, education and food security. There is no minimum fundraising target set. Schools will be furnished with a report on the project(s) their support was directed to.

## **Action for social justice**

An objective of the immersion programme is to open the minds of the students to gain a sense of global citizenship. Each immersion group experience is unique and the long term impacts of the programme are still emerging. Students and teachers have found their perceptions challenged as they confront the complexities of life in the developing world. The most immediate change is perhaps a shift in attitude among those who travel: the first exposure to Africa for the vast majority of students with many expressing surprise at not meeting their “idea” of the continent formed mostly from Western media and charity ads. Solidarity is built with the host community and mutual respect is visible between both cultures.

## **Health and Safety**

Aidlink has 30 years of experience working in the developing world. Health and safety are of paramount priority when planning an immersion programme. Aidlink is proud of its record in this regard. In the initial planning stage a full and comprehensive risk analysis will be conducted in the proposed programme areas. Risk mitigation strategies are built into the programme design.

## **Contact**

For further information on Aidlink and/or immersion programmes please contact:

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