



# REVOLUTIONIZING DEVELOPMENT

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK OF  
ROBERT CHAMBERS

EDITED BY  
ANDREA CORNWALL AND IAN SCOONES

# Revolutionizing Development



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Reflections on the Work of Robert Chambers

EDITED BY

*Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones*



First published in the UK and USA by Earthscan in 2011

For a full list of publications please contact:

Earthscan

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Revolutionizing development : reflections on the work of Robert Chambers / edited by Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84971-329-0 (hbk.) – ISBN 978-1-84971-330-6 (pbk.) 1. Chambers, Robert, 1932– 2. Rural development–Developing countries. 3. Economic development–Developing countries. I. Cornwall, Andrea, 1963– II. Scoones, Ian.

HN981.C6.R45 2011

307.1'412092--dc22

2010048665

ISBN: 978-1-849-71329-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-849-71330-6 (pbk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632

Typeset by JS Typesetting Ltd, Porthcawl, Mid Glamorgan

Cover design by John Yates

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**Colin Fuller** is retired. He worked at the Kenyan Institute of Administration and then for 30 years at the University of Manchester.

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# Acknowledgements

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This book has been very much a collective project. We sent out an initial email to potential authors in late 2009, and almost immediately got a deluge of enthusiastic replies. In fact, everyone we asked agreed. This is, of course, testament to the great respect and affection Robert engenders in his friends and colleagues, something that comes across very strongly in the contributions to this book.

In writing the chapters, we asked everyone to respond to a theme or issue or a particular period in Robert's career. At Robert's own insistence, this was not to be a standard Festschrift, full of unqualified, adulatory praise. We wanted everyone to engage with the different ways Robert has influenced them and their work, and the wider field that they work in. The result is a complex tapestry of short reflections, commentaries and critiques, complemented by an introductory chapter that offers a chronological overview alongside a synthesis of some recurring themes across the book. Stretching as it does from the end of colonialism in Africa to the present day, the book is in many ways a story of development over 50 years, seen through the unique lens of the work of one of development's most influential thinkers and practitioners.

Robert's influence stretches far further than the few who have been able to write for this book. There are many thousands of students, researchers, development workers and policy-makers from across the world who have been touched by his work, both directly and indirectly.

In putting together the book, we would like to thank Naomi Vernon, Georgina Kane and Oliver Burch at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) who oversaw the compilation and formatting of the book's many chapters. In addition, we would like to thank Louise Daniels and Jane Stevens for putting together the listing of Robert's works contained in the Appendix. This impressively long list of written works forms the basis of a document archive being established by the British Library for Development Studies at IDS, under the direction of the head librarian, Julie Brittain [www.ids.ac.uk/go/robertchambers](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/robertchambers). And of course finally we would particularly like to thank Robert for both agreeing to the project (a little reluctantly) and answering the many queries that have been put to him by both the authors and the editors.



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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

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3ie	International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
ABCs	Attitude and Behaviour Changes
AKRSP	Aga Khan Rural Support Programme
ALPS	Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ActionAid)
APRS	Accountability, Planning and Reporting System (ActionAid)
BARI	Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute
BIRI	Bangladesh Rice Research Institute
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CASS	Centre for Applied Social Sciences
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
CIAT	International Center for Tropical Agriculture
CIMMYT	Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo (International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre)
CIP	Centro Internacional de la Papa (International Potato Center)
CLTS	Community-Led Total Sanitation
COPP	Community Oriented Project Planning
CVI	Chronic Vulnerability Index (Ethiopia Early Warning Working Group)
DC	District Commissioner
DDP	District Development Project
DFID	Department for International Development
DIY	do it yourself
DNIVA	Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations
DO	District Officer
EDP	Exposure and Dialogue Programme
EPP	eclectic participatory pluralist
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (UN)
FEWS NET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network (USAID)
FIVIMS	Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping System (FAO)

FMO	Forced Migration Online
GCARD	Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development
GDI	Gender Development Index
GDP	gross domestic product
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
GFAR	Global Forum on Agricultural Research
GIS	geographical information system
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
HFC	Hindustan Fertilizer Corporation
HPI	Human Poverty Index
IAASTD	International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development
IAU	Impact Assessment Unit (ActionAid)
IBFEP	Indo-British Fertilizer Education Project
ICARDA	International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas
ICRISAT	International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IIMI	International Irrigation Management Institute
ILAC	Institutional Learning and Change
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRMA	Institute of Rural Management at Anand
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
KIA	Kenya Institute of Administration
KPI	key performance indicator
LCDDU	local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MIS	management information system
MRM	modern rice mill
MYRADA	Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency
NDHR	National Human Development Report
NEPAN	Nepal Participatory Approaches Network
NGO	non-governmental organization
NIPRANET	Nigeria PRA Network
NONIE	Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation

ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAMFORK	Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya
PIM	project implementation management
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PM&E	participatory monitoring and evaluation
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PPB	participatory plant breeding
PPSC	Participation Power and Social Change
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRADAN	Professional Assistance for Development Action
PRAP	Participatory Rural Appraisal and Planning
PRC	Participation Resource Centre (based at IDS, Brighton)
PRGA	Participatory Research and Gender Analysis
PRRP	participatory review and reflection process
PRS	Poverty Reduction Strategies
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
PTD	Participatory Technology Development
PUCL	People's Union for Civil Liberties
PVA	Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (ActionAid)
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
QEH	Queen Elizabeth House
QTWGAs	questions that won't go away
RCPLA	Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action
REDD	Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation
RPN	<i>Refugee Participation Network</i>
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
RSC	Refugee Studies Centre
RSP	Refugee Studies Programme
SDAN	Social Development Advisers' Network
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SLA	Sustainable Livelihoods Approach
SOSOTEC	Self-Organizing Systems on the Edge of Chaos
SRDP	Special Rural Development Programme
SRI	System of Rice Intensification
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	Office of the UN High Commissioner
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund

USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VAM	Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping (WFP)
VERC	Village Education Resource Centre
WDR	World Development Report
WFP	World Food Programme
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing
WSP	Water and Sanitation Programme
WSP – EAP	Water and Sanitation Programme – East Asia and Pacific
ZOPP	Ziel Orientierete Projekt Planung (Goal-Oriented Projected Planning)

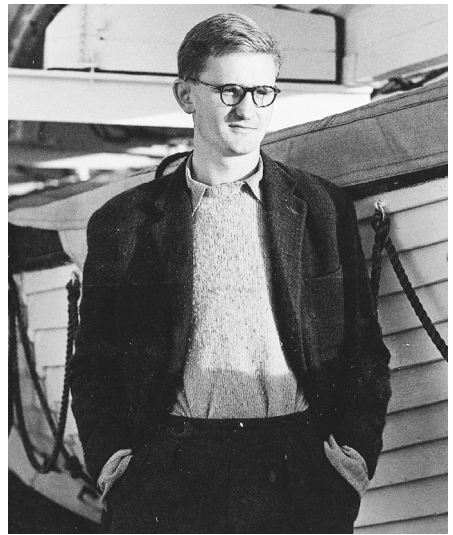
*Photographs*

Robert Chambers

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Growing up in Cirencester (1940s)



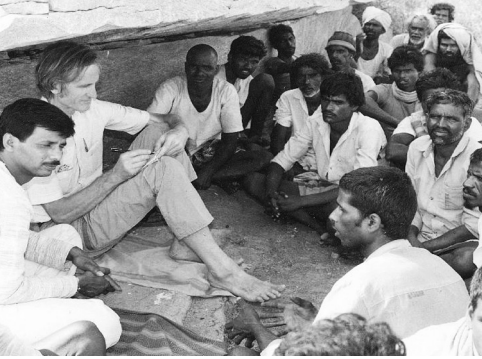
En route to Gough Island (1955)



Robert and his parents (1956)



District Officer in Maralal, Kenya  
(1958–60)



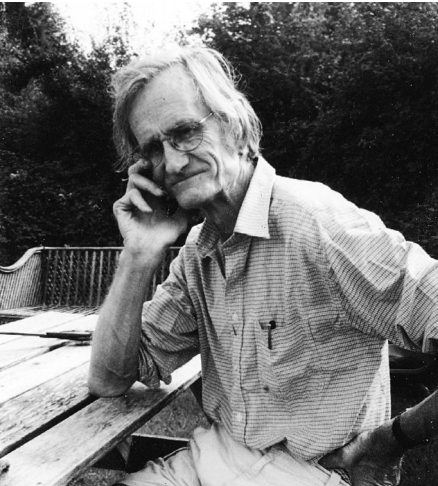
With quarry workers in India (1992)



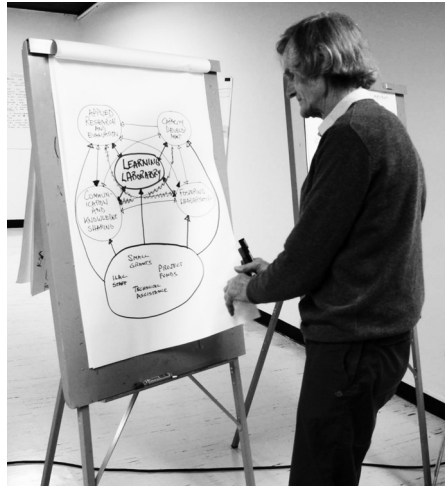
Marathon running (1999)



Workshop in Iran (1997)



Sussex (2004)



ILAC meeting (2007)

# Putting the Last First: Reflections on the Work of Robert Chambers

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*Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-1

## INTRODUCTION

This book tells a particular history of development over the last 50 years, a period that spans the career of one of its most influential thinkers. Robert Chambers is clearly unique. But he is also very much a product of particular time and place, of an era that spans the history of development in the post-World War period, from the transition from colonialism to the Washington Consensus and beyond. Contributors trace a story that stretches from Robert's posting as a District Officer in the colonial government of Kenya in the 1950s via work on irrigation management, rural livelihoods and agricultural research and in the promotion of participatory approaches in development, to his most recent engagement with Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS).

All the authors in this book have worked closely with Robert at various times. Each of the chapters reflects critically on the influences that Robert's work has had on them and the wider fields in which they have worked. Like so many of the other contributors to this book, Robert has had a profound influence not only on what we work on, but on how we work. Our own involvement with Robert originated in a shared interest in democratizing the practice of research and challenging conventional wisdoms about knowledge. We were both drawn to Rapid (and later Participatory) Rural Appraisal (RRA and PRA) for the iterative, provisional and processual way of learning about lives and livelihoods that they offered, and their potential to democratize development research. Both of us, in different ways, came to a more critical appraisal of the trajectory that PRA was to take; one that led us to closer engagement in our own work with the politics of knowledge, policy

and development practice. In the years since then, we have worked with Robert on numerous other themes, from sustainable livelihoods and vulnerability to downward accountability and institutional change in development organizations.

The book is divided into four sections. The first addresses Robert's contributions to the way in which development itself is conceptualized and practised. The second highlights his engagement with rural development, poverty and livelihoods, which have been a focus throughout his career. The third section focuses on methodological innovations, and particularly on participatory approaches. The final section addresses a theme that runs through Robert's work from the very beginning: the kind of professionals and professionalism that would best serve the ambitions of development. This introductory chapter offers an overview, sketching out the trajectory of Robert's work and highlighting some of the key themes that emerge from the chapters that follow.

## THE UNLIKELY REVOLUTIONARY

Robert John Haylock Chambers was born into a typical English middle class family on 1 May 1932 in Cirencester, in the heart of the English Cotswolds. He won a scholarship to Marlborough College, a well-known English boarding school, where he studied from 1945 to 1950. His upbringing enforced in him the aspirations of the British ruling classes, as he notes in his autobiographical piece 'Critical reflections of a development nomad':

*My script was to come top in school, to be a good little boy basking in approval, and go on and on to become Prime Minister or Director-General of the BBC.* (Chambers, 2005c, p69)

In 1949, he was awarded a scholarship by Cambridge to study natural sciences. His education was interrupted by a period of National Service, serving for 18 months in the Somerset Light Infantry. He went on to Cambridge in 1952 and was awarded a first class degree in history in 1955. After university, he became second-in-command and then leader of the Gough Island Scientific Survey. Subsequently, as English-speaking Union Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, he pursued an aborted PhD on the American ideal of success in non-fiction best sellers from 1919 to 1956, inspired by Dale Carnegie's (1936) *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In 1958, he took his first steps into the field of development when he was posted as District Officer to the colonial government of Kenya, where he managed development schemes in pastoral and smallholder areas (see Chapter 5).

At the dawn of Kenya's independence, he took up a post as lecturer in public administration at the Kenya Institute of Administration where his skills as a trainer and innovator in training approaches first emerged (Chapter 6). After a spell at the East African Staff College, having registered part-time for a PhD at

Manchester with Bill Mackenzie, he returned to the UK in 1966 as a lecturer in the department of government at the University of Manchester, where he finished his PhD. From 1967, he had a position as a lecturer in development administration in the department of politics and sociology at the University of Glasgow. It was in Glasgow that he met Jennifer Kathleen Scott, whom he was later to marry. Jenny was a psychology lecturer at Glasgow University and subsequently a clinical psychologist, and her professional and personal influences on Robert have been immense. As Robert put it in the preface to *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, 'she has been a continuous source of insights and ideas which have enabled me to see, feel and think differently' (Chambers, 1983, pix). Family life with Jenny and their three children, Fio, Ajit and Chris, was inflected with Robert's passions, whether the 'PRA suppers' that would bring 30 or more people to fill the house or Robert's absences on work travel, up mountains or on long-distance runs.

Robert's PhD was published as *Settlement Schemes in Tropical Africa: A Study of Organizations and Development* (Chambers, 1969). His early academic work continued to focus on the administration of settlement schemes, including in *The Volta Resettlement Experience* (Chambers, 1970), and subsequently a study of the Mwea irrigated rice settlement to the north of Nairobi (Chambers and Moris, 1973), which was regarded at the time as a model (see Chapter 3). In 1969, he returned to Kenya as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, coordinating research and evaluation for the Kenyan government's Special Rural Development Programme (Chapters 3 and 4), an experience that was to shape fundamentally his future career, and set him firmly against any further involvement with administration or management (see Chapter 33). It was at this time that he first became associated with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, then only three years old.

He joined IDS as a Fellow in 1972 (Chapter 2). One of his first projects was to write up his Kenyan experiences in the now classic book *Managing Rural Development: Ideas and Experience from East Asia* (Chambers, 1974). From 1973, he switched his geographical focus to India. As part of a team of researchers from Cambridge University, Madras University and the Agrarian Research and Training Institute, Colombo, under the leadership of Benny Farmer at the Centre for South Asian Studies at Cambridge University, he studied the green revolution in rice cultivation in South India and Sri Lanka (see Chapters 20 and 21). This is where he first became fascinated by farmers' irrigation and water management practices.

In 1975, he switched track again and became the first evaluation officer for the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva. He reflects:

*UNHCR was a sort of coelocanth, a survivor from an earlier, less evolved, age. It had no in-house competence in health, education, resettlement or agriculture. At the same time, there were millions of rural refugees in Africa. I concentrated on them, and tried to bring them to light as people not just statistics.* (Chambers, 2005c, p72)

He left after only 18 months, having been warned by someone that he was, ‘beginning to become like a UN civil servant, which I took as a health warning’ (Chambers, 2005c, p72). However, that short period produced a number of important papers, such as ‘Rural refugees in Africa: What the eye does not see’ (Chambers, 1979b) which attracted the attention of Barbara Harrell-Bond (Chapter 13). In the early 1980s, during the establishment of the Refugee Studies Programme (RSP) at Oxford University, Robert was able to bring his influence to bear. Barbara Harrell-Bond recounts that John Gerhart of the Ford Foundation when visiting the RSP had been instructed ‘in no uncertain terms’ by Robert, who had said, ‘and now, John, you fund that woman’.

One of the great advantages of IDS at the time, as Richard Jolly (see Chapter 2) notes, was that its Fellows were able to come and go, taking up appointments in different parts of the world and returning to Sussex to write up and share their experiences with students and colleagues. It was also a place that became a hub for conferences, workshops and meetings and convening of debates that played an important role in shaping development thinking. IDS of the 1970s and 1980s provided him with a ‘stable base and an organization and colleagues who tolerated and even encouraged my physical and intellectual nomadism’ (Chambers, 2005c, p75). This environment provided fertile ground for Robert to flourish. He never quite fitted in – either with the Marxists of the 1970s or the economists of the 1980s and 1990s – but he found his niche elsewhere, and with the establishment of the Participation Group (later Participation Power and Social Change, PPSC, team), an ever-expanding team of like-minded colleagues.

Back at IDS, in 1976, Robert embarked on a strand of work that was to prove equally influential. As Richard Longhurst (Chapter 12) explains, the ideas around seasonality and complex factors influencing people’s livelihoods became and remained one of Robert’s main strands of work, which came together around the seasonality conference of 1978 and the subsequent book in 1981, and later in the much quoted set of papers in the 1989 *IDS Bulletin* on vulnerability (see Chapter 11) and work on ‘sustainable livelihoods’ (see Chapter 10). It was in the 1970s that Robert’s interest in rural research methods was rekindled. Two landmark events brought together leading thinkers to challenge prevailing orthodoxies in agricultural research and development. One was an event focusing on what came to be called ‘indigenous technical knowledge’, which gave rise to the *IDS Bulletin* ‘Rural development: Whose knowledge counts’ (Chambers and Howes, 1979). The other was a workshop on an emerging methodology that challenged the very core of contemporary research practice: Rapid Rural Appraisal. This produced a special issue of the journal *Agricultural Administration* (Carruthers and Chambers, 1981).

After this intensely productive spell at IDS, Robert went to India in 1981, to work as a programme officer and project specialist in poverty and natural resources with the Ford Foundation in New Delhi, where he completed the writing of perhaps his most influential work, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983). This book remains to this day certainly the most accessible,

and probably the most influential, text on rural development. It is, as Jon Moris (Chapter 3) observes, ‘still the *one* book for “beginners”’. Due to a phenomenally low cover price, it is also a book that was able to find its way into places that academic books rarely if ever travel, and it has made its mark on generations of development professionals – ourselves included.

During his time in India, Robert was able to explore his passions for irrigation management, livelihoods, trees and common property resources. These were inspiring times. As Tushaar Shah (Chapter 17) recalls: ‘Robert made deep impressions on development professionals such as Anil Shah of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and civil servants like N.C. Saxena, who already lived by the ideals that Robert was so eloquent in championing.’ Significant works emerging from his work in India from this period included pieces on groundwater and trees (Chambers and Longhurst, 1986; Chambers, Saxena and Shah, 1989b; also Chapters 17 and 18). By 1985, Robert was back at IDS and was able to pick up on these themes and enlist, convene and excite others. His writing on canal irrigation during this period was especially influential, culminating in the 1988 book *Managing Canal Irrigation: Practical Analysis from South Asia*. As Director-General of the recently established International Irrigation Management Institute, Roberto Lenton recalls handing out a copy of the book to each researcher at the Institute as soon as it came out (see Chapter 16).

The latter part of the 1980s saw the coming together of a number of important areas of Robert’s work, culminating in the 1987 Farmer First workshop at IDS. Work with Janice Jiggins laid out a ‘parsimonious paradigm’ (Chambers and Jiggins, 1987b; Chapter 15) for agricultural research for resource-poor farmers, while the conference brought together researchers and practitioners from across the world for five days of intense debate and discussion. The subsequent book (Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp, 1989a) represented the start of a wider movement in agricultural research and development that persists in different ways today (see Chapters 14 and 15). In addition to the focus on putting farmers first in agricultural research and development, Robert also emphasized the importance of understanding agricultural environments from a farmer’s point of view highlighting in particular the significance of ‘micro-environments unobserved’ (Chambers, 1990).

Robert wrote for the first time about ‘sustainable livelihoods’ in a 1985 note for a strategy review of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). This was picked up through interactions with M. S. Swaminathan, who coined the term ‘sustainable livelihood security’, which became integral to the the World Commission on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission (Brundtland, 1987; Swaminathan, 1987). The concept was given further momentum by the inspirational then Director of IIED, Richard Sandbrook, who shared with Robert an acute ability to see and take up emerging opportunities, as well as an irreverent humour and sense of mischief. A major conference organized by IIED as a follow-up to the Brundtland Commission report and a precursor to the Rio conference of 1992 featured an important think-piece

by Robert (Chambers, 1987c). This was the beginning of a longer term relationship with IIED. Subsequent work with Gordon Conway led to the highly influential IDS working paper ‘Sustainable rural livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992), in part written in a less than salubrious hotel in the foothills of the Himalayas as Conway recalls (see Chapter 10). The sustainable livelihoods approach went on to have huge influence among donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide (Scoones, 2009).

Connections with IIED were further deepened with the turn to methodological innovation, as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) was taking off. A key moment was the Khon Kaen conference on RRA in 1985 (KKU, 1987), which brought together a wealth of experiences and approaches. Gordon Conway and Robert subsequently joined forces to carry out a training workshop for the Ethiopian Red Cross in Wollo in 1988, which brought together agro-ecosystem analysis and rapid appraisal, creating an expanded toolkit of methods (see Chapter 10). Robert wrote a poem for the Khon Kaen conference that captures very vividly what was to become the fate of PRA, for which RRA was swiftly abandoned:

*Is RRA now all the rage?  
This is a vulnerable stage  
We need to know how very bad  
It is to be the latest fad  
Beware the fate of FSR [Farming Systems Research]  
Which grew and spread too fast and far...  
Are skinny surveys RRA?  
And has all this arrived to stay?  
A danger is to be dogmatic  
The vital spirit is pragmatic  
To gain high levels of utility  
Proceed with caution and humility  
The challenge is for us to change  
To understand a wider range  
Not rural tourists' biased trips  
But bold and brave professional flips  
Are needed for a stronger trend  
To see things from the other end.*

Also in 1988, in Room 221 at IDS – a room that subsequently came to be used so often by Robert for his workshops that behind one of the batik wall hangings was a sign that said ‘Robert, put it back’, a reference to Robert’s habit of taking down the pictures and plastering the walls with battered flip chart diagrams – Robert invited colleagues from IIED, along with others experimenting with diverse rural research methodologies, to the first in a series of IDS workshops on this new methodology. Out of this came *RRA Notes*, published by the Sustainable Agriculture Programme

of IIED, and now in its twenty-second year, changing its name in the mid-1990s to *PLA Notes* to reflect the shift from *rapid* to *participatory* and from *appraisal* to *learning and action*. This was to pave the way for an intense and exciting period of collaboration with IIED, with Robert often dropping into the cramped offices of the Sustainable Livelihoods programme to share slides from his trips and compare notes on new methods (see Chapter 22).

In 1989, Robert returned to India, funded by the Ford Foundation as Visiting Faculty at the Administrative Staff College of India in Hyderabad. This was the period in which RRA transformed into PRA and in which, together with Indian practitioners, notably Meera Kaul Shah, Parmesh Shah, Jimmy Mascarenhas, Sam Joseph, Anil Shah, Sheelu Francis, John Devavaram, Somesh Kumar, Prem Kumar, Kamal Kar, Ravi Jayakaran and Neela Mukherjee, Robert devoted himself passionately in its uptake and spread (see Chapters 22 and 23). Robert writes:

*'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', or so it seemed. It is difficult to express the exhilaration and amazement of those days when we discovered 'they can do it', that poor people without education, women, children and men, had capacities to map, diagram and analyse of which we had not dreamt. (2005c, p72)*

Brimming with excitement over his experiences in India, he returned to IDS and set about promoting PRA. His IDS working paper 'Rural appraisal: Rapid, relaxed and participatory', published in 1992, continues to be a landmark and has been translated into Chinese, Hindi and many other languages. The three articles on PRA that he subsequently published in *World Development* in 1994 captured some of the key elements of the approach and its history, and provided an important resource.

Influenced by his Indian experience, and returning to earlier preoccupations with development biases, Robert began to place more and more emphasis on changing the attitudes and behaviour of what he came to call 'normal professionals' – a term he had coined a decade earlier:

*Normal professionals face the core  
And turn their backs upon the poor  
New ones by standing on their head  
Face the periphery instead.  
(Chambers, 1987c, p229)*

It was, however, his 1997 book, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, that provided the most expansive account of the PRA revolution. Reprinted so many times that Robert began to crack jokes about the changing colours of the cover, this book made a huge impact. It was accompanied by Robert's tireless advocacy of its contents. His boundless energy took him around the world, as networks flourished and demand for PRA trainings exploded (see Chapters 22 and 29).

Inevitably, critiques emerged around the practice of PRA, including among some of its pioneers and key practitioners. These were crystallised in a statement published in Issue 22 of *PLA Notes* in 1995 (Absalom et al, 1995).<sup>1</sup> However, this did little to dampen Robert's enthusiasm; his maxim 'use your own best judgement at all times' gave license to disregard analysis of the wider structural and political context, and indeed of the consequences of the ways PRA was being put to use.

PRA and participatory approaches hit the development mainstream during the 1990s, at a time when participation was in the ascendant amongst donor and lending agencies (Chapter 7). PRA became fashionable, even mandatory. This stimulated a booming market in PRA training, and many careers and consultancy fortunes were made in the process. Stories abounded of shoddy practice and dubious methodological quality, prompting critical engagement from within what had come to be known as the 'PRA community' (Cornwall, Guijt and Welbourn, 1994; Scoones and Thompson, 1994; Guijt and Cornwall, 1995; Scoones, 1995) as well as from academics (Mosse, 1994; Richards, 1995; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Robert was, of course, as aware of the profusion of bad practice as anyone else, but his public silence was noticed.

'Scaling up' and 'institutionalization' became the buzzwords of the latter half of the 1990s as Robert and others sought to mainstream PRA. Once again Robert played a vital convening role, bringing together practitioners from around the world in two IDS workshops, *Who Changes? Institutionalizing Participation in Development* (Blackburn and Holland, 1998) and *Whose Voice? Participatory Research and Policy Change* (Holland and Blackburn, 1998). Blackburn, Chambers and Gaventa's (1999) paper for the World Bank laid out an agenda for mainstreaming participation in development, cautioning the Bank to 'go slow'. This was swept aside in the fervour for participatory methods that manifested in this period in the use of participatory tools for poverty assessment. By the end of the 1990s, the assemblage of methods that had been developed under the rubric of 'Participatory Poverty Assessments' (PPAs) had become acceptable enough to the development establishment to create an opportunity for the boldest move yet. This was a 23-country study, to be conducted over a period of months using 'participatory' methods, to inform the World Development Report of 2000/2001 on poverty.

*Voices of the Poor*, as it came to be known – subsequently published as *Crying Out for Change* (Narayan, Chambers, Kaul Shah and Petesch, 2000) – brought Robert into direct confrontation with the power of the development establishment. As John Gaventa argues in Chapter 8, this was the moment when Robert began to pay more explicit attention to contexts of power and politics. This is not to say that he had not engaged before with these issues. Indeed, *Managing Rural Development* (Chambers, 1974) highlights precisely the dynamics of power in the institutional practice of participation, and his 1994 article 'All power deceives' explores the dynamics of power in development encounters. Robert's poetry is full of angry allusion, targeted at unequal power relations in development. His (unpublished) verses on the World Bank are telling:

**Words of Power (2006)**

*We are the Talking Bank that names  
Words for Development Bingo games  
Masters of illusion we  
Rule through our vocabulary*

*Empowerment means having voice  
You enjoy the right of choice  
You are free in every way  
To run your country as we say*

*Ownership we now bestow  
To countries under us who owe  
The terms of ownership we set  
Debtors are owners of their debt*

*One proviso you must meet  
You sit in the driver's seat  
(but you must never try to feel  
to find whose hands are on the wheel)*

*Participation's all the rage  
Use the word at every stage  
You can all participate  
In our planning for your State*

*Self-doubt's strictly for the birds  
When power weakens, change the words  
We have confidence in our trick  
Listening's our new rhetoric  
On our Empire the sun won't set  
We are the Lords of Poverty yet*

**The Big Bank's Boast (2006)**

*Anything you do well acts as a trigger  
Anything you can do we can do bigger  
Damned with our scaling-up-instantly curse  
Anything you can do we can do worse.*

It was only when it became clear that basic principles of rigour and honesty were being manipulated by the World Bank, and that he was becoming a casualty in the process – ‘death by a million edits’, as he put it at the time – that his optimism about the extent to which participatory methods could change even the World Bank began to dissolve. But he had not lost hope of changing the development establishment through participatory practice. He simply shifted direction, focusing

instead on another form of reversal: shifting the focus of accountability from 'upwards' to 'downwards', and working with ActionAid to help design and support a new system that would attempt to do just this, the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) (Scott-Villiers, 2002; Chapter 31).

In doing so, he drew on one of the directions that work on participatory methodologies had taken in the late 1990s, participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) (Guijt, Arevalo and Saladores, 1998; Estrella with Blauert, Campilan, Gaventa, Gonsalves, Guijt, Johnson and Ricafort, 2000). This strand of work with development institutions culminated in the publication of *Inclusive Aid* (Groves and Hinton, 2004), which set out an agenda for reforming these institutions from within through more downwardly accountable and inclusive learning practices, such as immersions (Chapter 27; Irvine, Chambers and Eyben, 2004). Robert's contribution to *Inclusive Aid*, 'Shifting power to make a difference' (Chambers and Pettit, 2004), reflected his growing concern with questions of power (see Chapter 8).

Returning to his passion for methods, Robert took his engagement with the development establishment into yet another direction: this time, not with survey economists but with statisticians on 'parti-numbers' (Chambers, 2003c, 2007d; Barahona and Levy, 2007; Chapter 25) and encouraging those working to develop 'participatory GIS' with geographical information systems analysts (Chambers, 2006c; Corbett et al, 2006). In the midst of all of this frenetic activity, Robert would sporadically slip off to the Scottish Highlands to his favourite retreat, where he worked on two books, *Ideas for Development* (2005) and *Revolutions in Development Enquiry* (2008), that brought together diverse strands of his earlier work with new thinking about development. His latest working paper, 'Paradigms, poverty and adaptive pluralism' (Chambers, 2010) draws on complexity theory to make an ever more powerful case for focusing on people rather than things, and is quintessential Chambers with its boundless optimism, binaries and concern with the fundamentals of what it takes to change development mindsets and practice.

At the same time, Robert was beginning a new period of engagement with the realities of people living in poverty – one that had taken him away from a focus on development organizations to more grassroots initiatives, and back to some of the ideas that had inspired his earlier critiques of development practice. One is the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), which Norman Uphoff has been championing (see Chapter 32). Another, which has absorbed much of Robert's energies in recent years, is Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), which resonates with an enduring concern with stimulating people to take charge of their own development. Summed up in the subtitle of a recent policy briefing, 'Beyond subsidies: Triggering a revolution in rural sanitation' (Bongartz and Chambers, 2009), CLTS has given rise to a veritable revolution in the field of sanitation (see Chapter 19). CLTS epitomizes Robert's renewed emphasis on empowerment that comes from engagement with grassroots change: eschewing external material contributions, and built around an intervention that consists of 'hands-off' facilitation, and changing people's attitudes and behaviour (Chambers, 2009b).

This brief account cannot begin to do justice to the depth, diversity and dynamism of Robert's work, which has spanned so many decades and ranged over so many sectors. What does emerge, however, is a restless quest for innovation, an ability to seize and run with emerging opportunities, and to champion those that hold the potential for bringing about significant transformations in the way in which development is thought about and done. Robert has taken on some of the most sacred shibboleths of development, changing the ways in which core concepts such as 'poverty' and 'participation' have come to be understood. He has done this not through the more conventional practices of the development academic – empirical research, scholarly papers published in esteemed peer-reviewed journals – but through workshops, through hugely popular books that are written with a clarity that is altogether lacking in much of the academic world, and through a mix of energy, enthusiasm and charisma that leaves few who meet him untouched.

### INFLUENCING PEOPLE AND PRACTICE

As this brief chronology shows, Robert has influenced several generations of development professionals: some shaken out of their comfort zones by his 'reversals', others moved by coming into contact with him and being gripped by his preoccupations. While he is perhaps best known for his writings, as a trainer and facilitator he has reached thousands of people. His experience as a trainer stretches back to the 1960s, and a spell at the Kenya Institute of Administration in the first years of Kenya's independence, during which time his innovative training techniques were already being developed (see Chapter 6). His trainees went on into senior roles, including Permanent Secretaries. Jon Moris reflects on the legacy of the work that he and Robert did together in Kenya a few years later, training students from Makerere who went on to be Vice-Chancellors and senior civil servants throughout East Africa's Ministries of Agriculture (Chapter 3). He notes, recalling how they had struggled to produce a book that no one seemed to pay much attention to, 'what I did not then see as a beginner was that one's personal relations with colleagues and students are what really matters'.

Robert has also influenced large institutions. His passion for a different approach to agricultural research has had an impact at various times on the international agricultural research system, including the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Tushaar Shah (Chapter 17) and Roberto Lenton (Chapter 16) both recall Robert's role in the establishment of the International Irrigation Management Institute, later named the International Water Management Institute, part of the network of CGIAR centres, in 1984. More recently, Robert's engagement with the CGIAR-wide Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) initiative was, as Jamie Watts reports in Chapter 30, a source of support and inspiration, providing both weight and encouragement to those seeking change, often from the margins.

As a long-standing trustee of ActionAid, from 1993 to 2000 and again from 2002 to 2008, Robert's influence has been felt throughout the organization, and particularly in relation to project appraisal and impact assessment (see Chapters 26 and 31). Robert has always felt passionate about making sure that aid money is well spent and reaches poorer people. This led him to become involved in the Band Aid and Live Aid project committees, which he was part of from 1985 to 1989. Through his desire to ensure that development agencies give people living in poverty a voice, as well as his desire for downward accountability, Robert has played a major role in shifting perspectives on development within the NGO sector, with spin-offs elsewhere in the development establishment. Ravi Kanbur writes of Robert's support for 'immersions' that confront development professionals with the everyday realities of living in poverty (Chapter 27), and Ramesh Singh and Kamal Kar talk of the influence he has had on getting development professionals to examine their own attitudes and behaviour (Chapters 19 and 26).

Most of his influence has come not from sitting on committees or boards, where he gets frustrated by procedures and protocols, but from motivating individuals and connecting them with others. Whether this was connecting statisticians with an interest in participatory methods or people working on GIS and mapping, or those with interests in irrigation, water and sanitation, or indeed any of his numerous areas of interest and enthusiasm. Informal networks within the bilateral and multilateral official development agencies gave Robert unusual access and significant influence (Chapter 7), although not without some pain (Chapter 8). Before email, Robert would despatch hundreds of letters – often containing a single sentence, sometimes just one word – with copies of articles and other materials that he thought would inspire. His long-suffering secretaries at IDS, notably Helen McClaren and Jenny Skepper (subsequently Edwards), were always kept very busy. Today Robert's ceaseless communication continues with ever-escalating email traffic.

As the PRA explosion gained momentum, fed by Robert's own networking efforts, he helped with the establishment of more formal networks and resource centres, evolving into the Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) network (Chapter 29). Through a series of grants from multiple donors, notably Novib and the governments of Sweden, Switzerland and the UK, he had enormous flexibility in allocating funds to support new initiatives by others. People could come to him with a good idea and leave with a small grant to pursue it – his philosophy was very much 'let a thousand flowers bloom'. When the IDS Participation Group developed more formal structures and procedures, Robert successfully advocated a budget line called 'exploiting opportunities' that permitted rapid responsiveness to an emerging opportunity.

The ideas that Robert has championed – participation, downward accountability, seasonality, multidimensional perspectives on poverty and vulnerability, among many others – have become part of the lexicon of development. That he has been able to influence such a broad canvas of ideas and practices relates to his ability to spot a good idea, articulate it in interesting and accessible ways, and

mobilize people around it, motivating them to take the idea on, develop it and institutionalize it.

Given the significance of the impact Robert has had on development thinking and practice, it is extraordinary that it was not until 1995 that he was awarded a professorship by the University of Sussex. Earlier, he had been turned down for a professorship on the grounds that he had not published enough in prestigious journals, although arguably he was by then better known and more influential than most of the members of the promotions committee. Annoyed by such a rebuff from these ‘negative academics’, he poured his energy into galvanizing the PRA movement. Recognition instead came from other quarters. In 1995, he was honoured by the Queen with the award of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and awarded an honorary DLitt by the University of East Anglia. Later, in 2007, the University of Sussex officially recognized his achievements with the award of an honorary DLitt.

## TRANSITIONS

Different people know Robert from different times. This is reflected in the chapters, which stretch over encounters with Robert and his work over a period of half a century. While there are striking continuities, as we have discussed in the previous section, there have also been some important transitions – in thinking, in outlook, in intellectual focus and in practical and political concerns.

Reading across the contributions, there are two transitions that strike us as particularly significant. The first has been a transition from top-down administration and management to a more bottom-up participatory approach to development, for which he subsequently became development’s best-known advocate (see Chapter 4). Robert’s career started as a colonial administrator. His major work included the study of highly managerially focused settlement schemes and later the management of a large evaluation team for the Kenya government’s Special Rural Development Programme (SRDP). This culminated in the 1974 book *Managing Rural Development*, which included an elaborate system for project implementation and management (PIM) that he developed with Deryke Belshaw. This was far removed from the ‘new, improved Chambers’ that David Leonard describes as having come about in reaction to all that had gone before (Chapter 4). Leonard comments that Robert’s experience as a manager with the SRDP ensured that ‘he vowed never to take on administrative responsibility again. This vow greatly strengthened his publications, intellectual freedom and popularity in the rest of his career.’ As Robert puts it:

*From planning, issuing orders, transferring technology and supervising, they shift to convening, facilitating, searching for what people need and supporting. From being teachers they become facilitators of learning.*  
(Chambers, 1995b, p34)

There was another dimension to this transition that was to prove highly significant. The evaluation research that Robert coordinated in the 1970s deployed large-scale survey approaches and extractive forms of data gathering. Again, he was to reject this completely. In Chapter 3, Jon Moris describes how Robert's mounting frustration during the studies of the Mwea Irrigation Settlement led him to ask Moris why he did not jettison his long questionnaire 'to address the real issues'. Moris reflects:

*My rigidity and inability to analyse the survey data rapidly became the basis for Robert's critique of academic social science in his Rural Development: Putting the Last First (Chambers, 1983). It would convince Robert that policy-oriented enquiry could not afford the luxury of a time-consuming expensive and rigid 'multi-subject' baseline survey. Of course he was right.*

In his enthusiastic embrace of quicker and more direct ways of finding out, Robert recaptured elements of his practice as a colonial officer and subsequent trainer of administrators which, as Colin Fuller describes in Chapter 6, involved many techniques such as foot safaris and intensive field engagements over short periods that had many resonances with what became RRA and later PRA.

The second transition emerged out of Robert's experience with the growth of participatory approaches. This was a transition from a focus on tools and techniques to a greater focus on people and power, inspired first by a belief that changing development was about changing practices, and these changed practices in turn would change people. He then came to recognize, with the extraordinary scale and speed of the uptake of PRA, that methods alone were not the answer. The industry that grew up around PRA had largely focused on the now well-known repertoire of methods – maps, transects, ranking and so on. But at the same time, and particularly in India, a greater concern for what came to be dubbed 'attitude and behaviour change' was emerging. This was influenced by different traditions, such as social work, education and learning theory, psychology, and in the Indian context particularly Gandhian philosophy and practice. Through Robert's interactions with Indian colleagues, this increasingly influenced his thinking and practice. It also resonated strongly with both his critiques of top-down management, but also his personal liberal values that emphasized the importance of personal change and responsibility.

The behaviour of development professionals was, of course, a long-standing concern for Robert. The strand of PRA practice emphasizing behaviour and attitudes came to be an opportunity to bring together his earlier thinking about reversals and biases with new ways of reaching those involved in development practice. Ramesh Singh (Chapter 26), Sam Joseph (Chapter 28) and Kamal Kar (Chapter 19), for example, talk about how profoundly Robert's passions and enthusiasms affected their own behaviour, and about the transitions in their own

lives and engagement with development that this brought about. But during the ‘PRA revolution’, Robert’s approach was determinedly individualist: he believed in the power of the personal, and of transforming individuals to be able to bring about what he calls ‘good change’. It was his encounter with the World Bank over the *Voices of the Poor* exercise that, John Gaventa argues, marked a significant shift in Robert’s approach. In Chapter 8, Gaventa notes how Robert called for a chapter of the World Development Report (WDR) focusing directly on the power of the powerful and the ‘professional, institutional and personal commitment and change’ that he felt was needed (Chambers, 2001, p305). When these calls were ignored, Gaventa recalls:

*Robert’s views on the ‘power of the powerful’ began to take a stronger tone, moving from a focus on the personal biases of the ‘upper’, which could change through learning and reversals, to a more structural view, in which the personal was deeply linked to the institutional.*

As Robert wrote in his 2001 article on the WDR: ‘I believe that extreme power is disabling, and that the World Bank and the [International Monetary Fund] IMF are victims of their power’ (2001, p305). His characteristically optimistic solution is to encourage the powerful to use their power to empower (Chambers, 2007d). As he writes in *Revolutions in Development Inquiry*: ‘A paradox of power is the win-win that all can gain when those with power over liberate themselves by empowering others’ (2008a, p153). From a development manager who believed that development could result in ‘good change’ if only the right systems, tools and techniques could be found and people trained to use them, Robert’s transition to a position from which he looks critically at the damage development agencies do through their disregard for people’s own knowledge and capacities has become more marked over the years. This is combined with a greater emphasis on people, power and empowerment, and people doing things for themselves outside the confines of formal development. This is manifested most acutely in his most recent passion, CLTS (see Chapter 19).

These various transitions were not sudden or dramatic; they were often prompted by particular experiences, but evolved much more slowly as he came to reflect on them and to return to earlier ways of thinking and doing. As David Leonard observes in Chapter 4, Robert’s capacity for change is deeply rooted in his values:

*What took Robert ultimately to his well-known participatory insights and methods was a product not of sudden revelations, but of a deep dedication to development for the poor, self-reflection, an eagerness to learn and a willingness to admit past mistakes.*

Robert himself talks of how the lessons he himself has drawn from reflection on his career, are ‘personal: to be critically self-reflective, alert and aware and ever willing to change’ (2005c, p77).

## CRITIQUES AND REFLECTIONS

The popularity of Robert’s ideas and approach to development has brought with it substantial critique. This is in part a reflection of the enormous influence that he has had in the field of development. Indeed, it would have been hard to bring about the kind of changes that he has championed without tackling some of development’s sacred cows and those who milk them. Even his greatest admirers are critical of certain elements of his approach, as some of the chapters in this book show.

As we have already discussed, these critiques have converged on the approaches to participation and the use of participatory methodologies for development appraisal and evaluation that Robert has tirelessly promoted since the early 1990s. Less visible to an external audience, there has been substantial self-critical reflection within the networks of which Robert was a part. This has often been far more sophisticated than the potshots taken by academics with no experience in the use of participatory methodologies themselves. Many of these critiques highlight the dangers of short-cut methodologies that do not take complex cultural contexts into account (Richards, 1995), nor demonstrate the conventional requirements for research rigour. Barbara Harriss-White (Chapter 20), for example, comments on the contrast between the painstakingly longitudinal survey work that she and her colleagues continue to do, and Robert’s enthusiasms for rapid assessments. In a similar vein, John Harriss (Chapter 21) questions whether RRA/PRA and associated rapid research could ever replace sustained field engagement in the ‘village studies’ tradition.

Other critiques have focused on the consequences of the mainstreaming of participation in development institutions, and the ‘tyranny’ that the use of participatory approaches in development had become by the late 1990s (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Leal, 2007). Reflecting on her experiences from within one of the donor agencies who embraced participation in the 1990s, Rosalind Eyben (Chapter 7) gives an account of the disjuncture between the rhetoric and practice of participation as it came to be taken up by mainstream development. Others still took exception to Robert’s focus on the individual as the agent of change, and his apparent disregard for politics and structural power relations. These included those working from the standpoint of public administration, reflecting concerns with the implications of Robert’s optimistic vision of people’s own capacities and motivations (Brown, 1998). Marxist political economists would point to the historically embedded structural constraints to transformation, while political scientists would emphasize the relationship between states, elites and citizens in processes of political change, critiques of the neglect of structural inequities that

have been echoed more broadly by a number of writers in development studies (see, for example, Kapoor, 2002; Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

Of course Robert understands where these critiques are coming from, and occasionally – if obliquely – acknowledges them. But in practice, he steadfastly ignores them. As a consequence, he is accused of being the naïve populist, someone with his head in the sand, unable to see the bigger political picture. Some even hold him responsible for many of the failures of development in the 1990s (Biggs, 2008). Yet Robert's approach is less a case of naïvety than a deliberate strategy, one that depends on enlistment and the construction of consensus rather than an oppositional, confrontational approach. He is shrewd, cautious, conflict-averse and thinks deeply about the implications of what he voices and lends support to publicly. As he admits, he can be and has been wrong, but he firmly believes that 'good change' can only happen if you take risks, make judgements and, above all, act.

### DEVELOPMENT'S PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

The great figures of development studies, as in any other area of study, have generally pursued relatively narrow areas of research for the majority of their careers. Publishing in renowned academic journals, receiving grand prizes, speaking at hallowed events, they become professors at early ages, and are recognized with honorary professorships around the world. Robert's career path has not been like this. He is and has always been far better known, recognized and appreciated in the wider world of development, among NGO workers, development practitioners and field researchers in agricultural research centres, for example, than in traditional academic circles or indeed in his home institution.

Robert is a particular kind of revolutionary. For a man whose background was in many ways so utterly conventional, Robert is all the more extraordinary for having become such an iconoclast. What, then, are the key characteristics that come through in the contributions to this book?

A classic liberal with a strong sense of fairness, Robert is outraged by suffering and injustice, and sees the route to change as being through revolutionizing people to think and behave differently, rather than through radical structural transformations. We see this in one of the hallmarks of his work, his emphasis on 'reversals': turning things on their head, sometimes literally, in order to see them from a different perspective and recognize hidden attributes and possibilities. He always thinks outside the box, challenges conventional wisdoms and disciplinary boundaries without being beholden to professional and institutional constraints. Recurrent themes have emphasized these reversals, 'putting the last first', as well as 'putting the first last' through a 'pedagogy of the powerful'. Sometimes radically new ways of thinking have emerged from this, resulting in paradigm shifts in diverse fields.

Some of this has been due to his restless movement between fields and issues, bringing ideas with him while also being able to see things from unusual

or unexpected perspectives. It has also been due to an uncanny prescience that he tends to disavow, but that is all the more striking for its repeated appearance, and the stubborn, sometimes dogmatic, persistence that has allowed him to swim against the tide on so many occasions. The chapters of this book carry repeated mentions of Robert pushing at and breaking boundaries, of him challenging and contesting what is taken for granted, what is considered 'normal' for development professionals, as an outsider unconstrained by conventional ways of thinking. In many ways, he is like an Enlightenment polymath who is, as he puts it, delightedly 'undisciplined' (Chambers, 2005c).

Many of those who have worked with him will have memories of Robert standing on his head in the middle of a room full of people in formal dress, or of him taking off his jumper and tying it in a knot around his waist before starting to turn chairs over and scatter pens on the floor to create the right environment for one of his Self-Organizing Systems on the Edge of Chaos (SOSOTEC) sessions. There is something deliciously anarchic about the way Robert works. He is enticingly democratic, making everyone feel as if they have something worth listening to, valuing everyone equally and lending them the full warmth of his enthusiasm. His combination of a schoolboy humour and an utter delight in the ridiculous make him a lot of fun to be around. At the same time, he is deliberately and mischievously provocative, flouting the stuffiness and hierarchy that pervades the social worlds development professionals move in. While being intensely conflict-averse, those who know him well also know that he can become utterly furious when he encounters injustice, unfairness and bureaucratic incompetence, his rage well aimed at the obstructive effects of procedure or the arrogance of the powerful. All too rarely in a business that, as Ravi Kanbur (Chapter 27) notes, provides an all-too-comfortable living for its professionals, Robert not only eschews but actively rejects its trappings.

Robert is a superb communicator. His writing style is carefully honed, his choice of words and terms are always anguished over, and his form of rhetoric is striking and resonant (see Chapter 9). His writings are popular, in the best sense of the word, and he is passionate about publishing at low cost and in a form that is as widely accessible as possible. As a consequence they are widely read, unlike much else emerging from the academy. His training style is energetic, engaging and at times hilarious, but always gets the point across, often in profound ways. Robert has a ceaseless energy for networking, as a route for the take-up of his ideas and passions. In each of the areas in which he had sought to foster change, his approach has been heterodox and anarchic, opening up possibilities and encouraging people to take the initiative and do things their own way. He is no vanguardist and would balk at the idea of fomenting conflict or confrontation. He operates through creating new forms of practice and communicating and mobilizing support for them. Unlike many revolutionaries, he is prepared to – in his well-used adage – 'hand over the stick'.

Immense enthusiasm and unbridled optimism make Robert extremely effective in enlisting and mobilizing people. As he reflects:

*I am an optimistic nomad. My spectacles are rose coloured. Pessimists may be justified in claiming more realism. For whatever reasons, cups to me are more often half full than half empty. Life is more enjoyable this way, and I have a fond and possibly delusional belief that naïve optimism has a wonderful way of being self-fulfilling. Enthusiasm is another weakness, bringing with it the dangers of selective perception, and of doing harm when combined with power. (Chambers, 2005c, p68)*

All of this comes with incredible supportiveness of others, particularly junior colleagues with whom he relates without any sense of hierarchy. Other personal characteristics are also important. At his own admission, he can be highly competitive and individualistic; his sports pursuits of marathons and mountain climbing certainly require this. Yet he is also a generous and loyal member of any collective he joins. He is personally highly disciplined and organized, but favours emergent and chaotic processes, which he regards as a more productive and creative way of generating energy and ideas. Despite his commitment to participation, Robert's restless energy and wish to get things done can make him impatient and frustrated with drawn-out participatory processes. Having been trained as an administrator and manager in the most British of traditions as part of the colonial service, he has come to pride himself on being almost an anti-manager, rejecting managerialism and all its trappings.

Robert himself notes that his 'comparative advantage came from not having to lecture, not having administrative responsibility, not being promoted, not having research projects to manage, and not having to invest time as many do now in the often demoralizing business of preparing competitive bids' (2005c, p75). For all his massive achievements, it is, as all the authors in this book reflect, his personal qualities – his generosity, his humour, his mischievousness, his optimism and his enthusiasm – that stand out and make him special. We have all been very lucky to work with him.

## NOTE

- 1 The full list of signatories is: Elkanah Absalom, Robert Chambers, Sheelu Francis, Bara Gueye, Irene Guijt, Sam Joseph, Deb Johnson, Charity Kabutha, Mahmuda Rahman Khan, Robert Leurs, Jimmy Mascarenhas, Pat Norrish, Michel Pimbert, Jules Pretty, Mallika Samaranayake, Ian Scoones, Meera Kaul Shah, Parmesh Shah, Devika Tamang, John Thompson, Ginni Tym and Alice Welbourn.



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*Part 1*

# **Conceptualizing Development**

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# Challenging Development Priorities

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*Richard Jolly*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-2

## INTRODUCTION

Robert Chambers has been a Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) almost from the beginning, joining in the late 1960s. Robert is certainly today the best-known of all of us in IDS. His pioneering contributions to the practice and articulation of participatory development have long been at the core of his work and creativity. This has brought a wealth of insights to development studies and influenced practice and approaches of development practioners, including NGOs, donors and countries. Robert's emphasis on the need for 'putting the last first' and 'the first last' have challenged priorities at the very base of development. His emphasis on the need for personal commitment and for making clear the values underlying the work of all engaged in development have struck at the heart of the 'development business' – not to strike us dead or even to give us sleepless nights, but, at least for most of us, giving us pause for reflection, perhaps evoking a silent confession or a quiet resolve to try a new way.

As also a long-standing member of IDS and Director in the 1970s, soon after Robert was appointed, I would emphasize how Robert's contributions well fitted IDS's early and continuing emphasis on commitment and operational involvements. It was easier for Robert to spend time away from Sussex in Kenya, India, Sri Lanka and many other countries precisely because the need for IDS research staff to spend substantial periods in different developing countries was built into the institute's structure and organization from the beginning. If IDS had been set up on the lines of a regular department or research institute of a university, this flexibility for working overseas would probably not have been possible. All

praise therefore to the vision of the Ministry of Overseas Development (as it was at the time IDS was founded), for recognizing the need for such involvements. It has made possible Robert's active participation in so many countries over his long career and is testimony to the importance and value of this form of organization.

Robert is larger than life in his sustained energy and enthusiasm, but he remains endearingly human – and competitive. It was some 40 years ago when I made the foolish mistake of agreeing to a pre-breakfast run with Robert. I can still remember my pain and exhaustion when, after a few hundred yards, Robert asked me whether I wanted to do another mile – or was it another ten miles? I was already so out of breath that I never fully caught his words. And Robert has never let me forget that I began as a lowly community development officer, whereas he was a District Officer and part of the Kenya administration, then the top of the pecking order of the British colonial system! Robert's energy and enthusiasm is also contagious. Years ago, he took Anthony Somerset, aged 11, on an excursion to the second highest peak of Mount Kenya. But the weather cleared, so Robert said 'let's try for the highest', which they did. Anthony became the youngest person at the time to have made it to the top.

## CHALLENGING ORTHODOXIES

Over his time in IDS, Robert has produced a long and influential series of contributions, each empirically driven, down to earth, engagingly written, full of insights and, over the years, ever more challenging to orthodoxy. Beginning with work to improve planning and evaluate implementation of programmes in Kenya, especially the Special Rural Development Programme (SRDP, see Chapters 3 and 4), Robert rapidly began to focus on the things that experts and conventional expertise overlooked or missed out – the poor farmers who were not reached (often never even noticed by extension workers), 'the tail-enders' receiving barely a trickle at the lower end of irrigation systems, the appropriate and often simpler technologies ignored by those promoting the latest or the most complex. By then, Robert's work had taken him to India and Sri Lanka (see Chapter 20) and other places in South Asia and Africa.

In 1978, Robert discovered seasonality – or rather, during a conference he organized with Richard Longhurst and others, he discovered that seasonality was one of the major missing elements in many analyses of rural development, indeed of development more generally (see Chapter 12). This led to *Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty* (1981), released as a paperback for widespread, low-cost distribution. The paperback has become the form of dissemination that Robert has continued to favour in a series of short books, designed for practical impact. Almost all of his major publications can be found in paperbacks – *Rapid Rural Appraisal: Rationale and Repertoire* (1980b), *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983), *Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for Rural Development* (1993b),

*Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997b), *Ideas for Development* (2005a) and *Revolutions in Development Inquiry* (2008a).

Those who believe that development research consists only of producing endless academic papers that never see the light of day must think again when faced with Robert's output. He writes for the practitioners – in gripping understandable prose, occasionally bursting into rhyme, with telling examples and always reaching clear and strong conclusions, even if it leads him to make admissions when he thinks he earlier got it wrong.

## PARTICIPATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Robert, of course, has not been alone in his writing on participation, his concerns for poverty and the need for fresh thinking on development. All three have been a growing theme of development studies, in part because of Robert's own outreach and contributions. By the early 1990s, participation and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods were part of the conventional wisdom of development, or at least of progressive practitioners. This was not totally surprising. Robert had been running training courses for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other UN agencies, for various donors and even for the World Bank.

In 1990, UNDP took a related and parallel initiative. The Human Development Report (HDR) was created by Mahbub ul Haq, with the support of Amartya Sen. It set out a people-centred approach to development, focused on strengthening the capabilities and broadening the choices of people to live long, healthy and fulfilled lives. The 1993 HDR contained the following key paragraphs:

*Participation, certainly not a new term, has been a part of the development vocabulary since the 1960s, or even before. But it has generally referred only to people's involvement in particular projects or programmes. In this [Human Development] Report, the critical difference is that participation is an overall development strategy-focusing on the central role that people should play in all spheres of life. Human development involves widening their choices, and greater participation enables people to gain for themselves access to a much broader range of opportunities.*

*Participation, from the human development perspective, is both a means and an end. Human development stresses the need to invest in human capabilities and then ensure that those capabilities are used for the benefit of all. Greater participation has an important part to play here: it helps maximize the use of human capabilities and is thus a means of increasing levels of social and economic development. But human development is also concerned with personal fulfilment. So, active participation, which allows people to realize their full potential*

*and make their best contribution to society, is also an end in itself.*  
(UNDP, 1993, p21)

This is close to Robert's own thinking and intellectual leadership in matters of participation. But, given the surge of global interest in human development as well as in participation, the quotation raises two basic questions: what can Robert's view of participation bring to human development? And what can human development bring to participation?

### WHAT ADDED VALUE CAN PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES BRING TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT?

In brief, participatory approaches can bring a wealth of experience and grassroots commitment. For instance:

- the strength and experience of participatory approaches in implementing development;
- methodological lessons from a multitude of participatory experiences;
- reality checks to top-down thinking and analysis;
- challenges to orthodoxy; and
- Robert's own leadership and amazing networking in emphasizing that development must begin with individual commitment.

Robert's own writings and activities have made clear and important contributions in all these areas, often with memorable examples – and sometimes confessions. Good examples and suggestions leap off the page in *Participatory Workshops* (Chambers, 2002b) – ways to arrange the seating, tips on how to avoid lecturing, 21 PRA/ Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) questions to ask oneself, 21 ideas to get started and 21 ways how not to answer the question. 'I don't know' is identified as disarming but only for use once and best kept in reserve. Robert's humour and humanity emerges once again. His other books describe numerous experiences and offer further tips and approaches for individuals to follow in his footsteps.

Robert has also helped those in 'top-down' positions to experience reality checks. Robert has helped organize situations where 'development professionals' are put in situations where rural peasant farmers and urban informal workers or slum dwellers are the experts. One case I followed was of World Bank professionals of the Asia division experiencing two days of 'rural immersion' in Indian villages. Those drafting HDRs, nationally or in New York, could gain much if they took advantage of Robert's experience in checking their perspectives by some similar PRA – following Robert in defining PRA as Participatory Reflection and Action. For those too busy to visit, Robert's writings about the aspirations of the poor – and their sense of powerlessness – can be found in *Crying Out for Change: Voices of*

*the Poor* (Narayan et al, 2000). Originally produced for the World Bank in 2000, this report drew on interviews with more than 20,000 poor women, men, youth and children in 23 countries, who shared their experiences and perceptions and priorities for change with research teams.

*Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b) brings home the challenge to professionals of all sorts, not just to experience reality checks but to begin the difficult task of reconstructing theory and analysis. This is where partnerships between participatory approaches and human development can contribute. The HDRs have taken human development methodology into a number of new areas: economic growth for human development (and participation); finance; human security; consumption; globalization; human rights; deepening inclusive democracy; cultural liberty in today's diverse world; aid, trade and security in an unequal world. All these are areas where positive approaches to new analysis can link with Robert's scepticism about existing orthodoxy. Participation and human development could both gain.

## **WHAT ADDED VALUE CAN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT BRING TO PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES?**

Human development has much to offer – perhaps more than those only acquainted with participatory approaches may realize. Human development is now well established, defined and analysed by 20 years of HDRs and by the application of the human development methodology in more than 700 National Human Development Reports (NHDRs) produced in 140 countries. It has also been advanced intellectually by the writings of the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and many others who have pursued human development analysis, often publishing in such places as the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*.

From this, human development has emerged as a multidisciplinary paradigm, integrating people-focused analysis in a frame directed to development strategy. In contrast to much participation writing, analysis and experience, a main point of focus in human development has been on national and international policy and action, not just at local or rural level. Human development has also stressed priorities and interactions within a broader context – economic, political and democratic, dealing with such issues as the conditions for inclusive democracy, the links with human rights and the priorities for macro-economic strategies that open opportunities for people to strengthen their own capabilities and expand their own choices. Human development has also expanded its horizons to explore what is needed for globalization to be a more equitable, stable and sustainable process.

Such issues of broader economic strategy are important and inescapable if participation at local level is to succeed in major reductions in poverty. Local opportunities for marketing produce or obtaining credit, extending feeder roads, health services, schools and other infrastructure, expanding employment and the

structure and rate of economic advance to a considerable extent are determined by policies and actions at national and regional level, well beyond the local. No matter how effective participatory approaches and actions are at the local level within communities, policies and practices at levels above are also critical, shutting off local opportunities in some cases, opening them up in others. Human development provides a frame for analysing all these issues.

In addition to analysis, the four human development indicators can make a difference. These indicators have generated new perspectives on the human dimensions of development, often producing results in sharp contrast to impressions created by statistical measures of economic growth and per capita incomes. The Human Development Index (HDI), now available for some 180 countries, has attracted media and political attention in many countries round the world. The Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) have helped raise awareness of gender inequalities – and demonstrate how some countries do much better than others. Similarly, the Human Poverty Index (HPI), a measure of deprivation reflecting the proportion of a country's population dying young (below the age of 40), malnourished, illiterate or lacking access to basic education or adequate water has helped to shift attention from the often misleading measures of 'income poverty'.

All this indicates the value added that human development can bring to participatory approaches to development.

First, it can bring more attention to issues of macro-economic policy, nationally and internationally, which have often been neglected or seen as at too lofty or top-down a level in the analysis or practice of participation. Of course, macro-policies would need to incorporate direct analysis of their impact on people and of opening – or closing – opportunities for participation. Given Robert's tough comments on the biases and model-building preoccupations of economists and 'macro-econometricians',<sup>1</sup> it is important to underline how the HDRs have already differed from orthodoxy in economics. The human development perspective of economic growth has always been to emphasize its character and distribution. As Mahbub ul Haq (1995, p40) put it, the key questions are: What type of growth? Who participates in it? And who derives the benefits?

Such issues have been elaborated and deepened in many of the annual HDRs, and a number of their country equivalents, the NHDRs. The HDRs from the beginning have recognized the fundamental importance of macro-economic strategy, even while rejecting much of economic orthodoxy. This said, the HDRs have been prepared by economists who are well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of orthodox strategies. Mahbub ul Haq himself was a clear example in this regard, having had experience as a civil servant planner and later as Minister of Economic Planning and Finance in his own country (Pakistan), as well as experience in the World Bank and the UNDP.

Second, human development indicators can have a direct impact on public awareness through the media and through contributing to political debate.

National and local level HDRs can help bring to life the realities of the human situation. In Brazil, Panama and the UK, for instance, HDIs have been calculated at municipio levels, often stimulating questions among the public about why people in their community are doing less well than in neighbouring localities.

Third, human development and capability analysis can help clarify realities in situations of contradictions and ambiguities. In his book, *The Idea of Justice*, Amartya Sen discusses the dilemmas posed by the apparently 'well-adapted' but deprived – Indian women accepting subjugated roles, persons physically handicapped and the many others who have adjusted 'their desires and expectations to what little they see as feasible' and who have trained themselves to 'take pleasure in small mercies' (2009, p183). Sen rejects the suggestion that considering people in such predicaments is necessarily paternalist. Rather, Sen points out, as I think Robert would, the positive role that interactive public discussion can play in ending society's tolerance of chronic deprivation and of related inequalities in society. Such discussion can also help strengthen the confidence and personal or group agency among those deprived. Sen's clear thinking and economic and philosophical writings can help underpin participatory approaches and, just possibly, extend their reach to economists dealing with issues of macro-economic policy-making.

Fourth, human development can help build new alliances and allies in movements for people-focused development. Already, human development has generated interest in virtually all countries in the world. A hundred thousand copies of the main report are published each year, in 12 languages, gathering headlines and supportive articles in the print media and often in radio and television. UNDP's websites record five million hits a year. The NHDRs stir similar attention at national level. There is a committed following in the academic world, exploring the deeper implications of the human development and capabilities approach. Such activities and commitments for 'putting people at the centre', in action, policy-making, media and intellectual activity, provides natural alliances and allies for participatory approaches. Efforts should be made for the two groups to reach out to each other.

## CONCLUSIONS

Robert has led the way in defining, promoting and widely demonstrating the value of participatory approaches to development on a truly global scale. By his books and teaching, his charismatic personality and the range of his involvements in field situations, participatory development is now a major part of the language of development, if not always of its practice. Robert's achievements are worthy of celebration – in IDS, his home institution, and far beyond among the many he has influenced, including the many empowered through his efforts. Robert has made a difference.

But the battle for sustaining participatory approaches to development is only at the beginning. Putting the poor first requires decentralization and democracy

– to empower poor people and others who are excluded and to give them real choices over their lives. This means political change. It also means changes of approaches, operationally and intellectually. People-focused methodologies and approaches need to replace dominant paradigms of top-down planning, top-down management and top-down economics. In their place must come approaches and methodologies that recognize the wisdom and experience of people and give them the opportunity and capabilities to make their own choices.

All this can be helped by building stronger alliances between all forms of participatory approaches and the thinking and practice of human development. Both are growing movements with committed followers in all parts of the world. Both can gain from closer links. Human development would bring a broader frame in which participatory approaches could be set. Participatory approaches would bring values, commitments and grassroots activists and activities to human development. Working together, the potential of each can be strengthened.

Such an alliance could bring together those who share Robert's shining insistence on the need for personal commitment to the cause of the poor and excluded with those who share a global vision of sustainable human development. Development can never succeed if it is only a business of increasing economic efficiency. The links between a vision of human development in a world of greater equity and justice and concern for the empowerment of people is very close.

## NOTE

- 1 For Robert in full flight against economists and macro-econometricians, see Chapter 3 of *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b), especially pp40–42 and pp49–54.

# Beginners in Africa: Managing Rural Development

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*Jon R. Moris*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-3

## INTRODUCTION

*Struggle is the real meaning of life...*

The words were there, above the bar in a crowded small room filled with Kikuyu farmers in their mud-spattered, khaki clothes. Robert Chambers was introducing me to the Mwea-Tebere Irrigation Settlement (as it was then called, Mwea Scheme hereinafter). It was a high-profile development project he had studied for his PhD and was revisiting as he expanded his dissertation into a major book, *Settlement Schemes in Tropical Africa: A Study of Organizations and Development* (Chambers, 1969). I was the new researcher, an American in an ex-colony I thought I knew well, having grown up in colonial East Africa. In fact, we were both beginners in different ways, although neither of us realized it then.

We came to our shared venture by quite different routes. I had completed my coursework for a PhD in anthropology from Northwestern University in the US; Robert already had his in politics from Glasgow. He was a former colonial officer (see Chapter 5) – one of only a few (such as David Brokensha, Steven Sandford and Paul Baxter) who made the transition into academia. Now he was the ‘research officer’ for Guy Hunter’s East African Staff College, a peripatetic training institution which sought to give senior African officials a better understanding of rural policies now that the three East African nations had achieved independence (see Chapter 6).

We met in Nairobi’s United Kenya Club, a hostel intended to improve race relations between Kenya’s elites: whites, Asians and Africans. I had arrived with 13

Makerere University BSc (agriculture) students needing to do their ‘special project’ research in the break before starting their final year. Robert suggested I might bring my entourage to teach them survey research techniques on the Mwea Scheme. He was going through a treasure trove of scheme files and he knew of a ‘research house’ we might occupy if we joined forces. Here I would locate my team, teaching them to administer a long, multi-subject questionnaire as we interviewed Mwea Scheme farmers. It should be easy, we both thought; this was one of Kenya’s best projects, one which realized high incomes for its tenant farmers.

## TENANT LIFE

If only life was so predictable! Soon my field team was reporting things that did not fit the management’s version of tenant life at all. My questionnaires asked a barrage of typical agricultural economic and household data questions, but it was not designed for a highly organized scheme and I had never thought to ask if farmers *liked* their situation. We had been told they realized a comparatively high cash income from the sale (to the scheme) of paddy they grew as licensed, tenant farmers. Farmers instead regarded themselves as very poor, barely surviving from one season to the next. Indeed, sometimes their income was entirely expended by the time they lined up to receive payment at the season’s end. They reported high prices for food, high disease risks and resentment that they must pay off scheme loans for their standardized, two-room houses in just three years. They also did not trust either the government or the scheme management, diverting their profits to off-scheme opportunities. Robert explained to me this was only natural: the first tenants had been ex-Mau Mau, landless ‘detainees’ who came to this scheme direct from detention.

Why, though, was acquiring *food* such a problem? Each tenant was permitted to retain 12 bags of paddy to be the family’s subsistence ration for the year. It was also assumed that fieldwork would be done by family labour, so, aside from official services (that the scheme deducted from tenants’ income), tenants should have few cash outlays over the season. Now, though, we learned from time allocation budgets done by Jane Hanger that women were especially pressed at harvest time. The scheme shut down milling and grinding of either rice or corn during harvest to prevent ‘black market’ sales – so women found their own work greatly increased. Farmers had to employ landless people from off the scheme to assist at harvest time, in order to stay within tight harvesting schedules. Women had also to double their cooking to provide food for workers in the fields. They paid these workers with paddy, leaving the family short for the coming year. We then learned that families also disliked the variety of rice the scheme management selected, picked for its gross yield per hectare. It was a heavy, glutinous rice, whereas for eating, people liked the light, fluffy *Sindano* rice. If women did not have access to unregulated ‘red soil’ food crop gardens, they had to buy unmilled maize and vegetables at high prices in the scheme-regulated markets.

The negative assessment of life 'on scheme' was shared among off-scheme Kikuyu and Embu, who refused to let their daughters marry scheme boys. It seems the consensus was that, in this place, people suffered from malaria and other diseases not found up the hill slopes among the prosperous coffee farmers. Women would spend hours waiting at the clinic to get their family members treated. They had to travel long distances from the scheme in search of firewood, the main fuel for cooking and heating. They had few chances to earn extra income, whereas those off the scheme often ran various rural businesses on the side. They also had no formal claim on the tenants' incomes, which were paid to the men after harvest by the scheme management. Schools were poorly run and the schedule of school fees did not match the scheme's payments. At first, Robert and I brushed these complaints aside, as representing only the more disgruntled tenants. However, linked studies by Jane Hanger (Hanger and Moris, 1973) on the situation of women and by Rolfe Korte (1973) on family nutrition substantiated tenants' complaints: life on the scheme was indeed harder than for even 'landless' squatters off the scheme (Chambers and Moris, 1973).

### SURVEY SLAVERY

Meanwhile, Robert watched in amazement as my Makerere students struggled to win farmers' cooperation. Why did I not just jettison my long questionnaire to address the real issues? I had to explain about other samples we would acquire later to ensure comparability – also, the 13 interviewers would now scatter across highland Kenya to conduct their own special project research efforts. My rigidity and inability to analyse the survey data rapidly became the basis for Robert's critique of academic social science in his book *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983). It would convince Robert that policy-oriented enquiry could not afford the luxury of a time-consuming, expensive and rigid 'multi-subject' baseline survey. Of course, he was right.

The Makerere students also warned me that one reason for their difficulties was because an earlier survey had asked questions about tenants' religion and was then subsequently used to identify members of a proscribed religious organization for the Administration. One afternoon at teatime the District Commissioner (DC) appeared at our door, ostensibly on a social call. I realized my presence was unwelcome and went elsewhere. The DC then asked Robert if he could review my Makerere questionnaires. Happily, Robert had been a District Officer (DO) in the Kenya government. He told the DC he would review what was being learned and if anything really seditious cropped up, he would alert the administration. But to hand over the questionnaires would destroy our field surveys and any later research as well. Perhaps this episode helped bring into sharp focus the question 'who owns survey information?' And how does it get used, once acquired?

Robert's earlier management interviews had earned the trust of Mwea's former manager, who had now become the head of a newly established National Irrigation Board. Robert learned the board was negotiating for German funds to expand the scheme onto 'vacant' land beyond the scheme's initial boundaries. The funds were intended to increase the security for Kenya's food supplies, a common rationale for funding large irrigation projects.

As it happens, one of my Makerere students was a Kamba, from the same people as those who lived without permission within the proposed expansion area. I had sent him to this very area for his special project research. Again, he found locals very reluctant to be interviewed. He would arrive an hour before an agreed interview time, usually catching the farmer just about to leave on his bicycle. Robert and I went to see the situation, becoming (as Robert would later call us) 'rural development tourists'. To our astonishment, we found nearly the whole area already planted to native food crops. Because of low and uncertain rainfall, when rains began the 'squatters' hired privately owned tractors to prepare their fields and then planted fast-growing legumes. The land was not vacant and it already produced valuable food – except the Kenya administration had turned a blind eye towards this situation.

## LEARNING LESSONS FROM MWEA

These and other experiences convinced me that the Mwea 'system' was unbalanced, devoting all its attention to technical efficiency but neglecting the actual welfare of the people recruited to take up annual production licences, the Mwea 'tenants'. They did not enjoy high incomes, their tenure was insecure, their lives less tolerable than among those living nearby and the scheme management took further decisions that unnecessarily increased their burdens. As of 1966, then, Robert and I had opposite views about this 'highly successful' irrigation scheme, the best (it was claimed) of any irrigation projects in Kenya.

We decided to cooperate on a follow-up book to *Settlement Schemes in Tropical Africa* (Chambers, 1969) derived from Mwea's experience, this time representing all the various viewpoints (Chambers and Moris, 1973). By this time (the early 1970s), the benefits claimed in 1966 had begun to appear on the ground at Mwea. On revisits, we found a far more prosperous membership, with many improvements in tenant lives. By now, too, I found Robert much more sensitive to the situation of local farmers within Mwea. He had recently been to Ghana, and edited a similar, multidisciplinary review of its ambitious Volta resettlement project (Chambers, 1970). We both agreed that Mwea was now delivering major benefits, but we saw it as having many special advantages not shared by other irrigation projects in Kenya.

Meanwhile, in Kenya, the National Irrigation Board had used Mwea's success as the basis to get World Bank funding for another large and ambitious irrigation project, on the lower Tana River in a very remote area. Robert and I believed

strongly this investment was a major mistake, predicated on ‘facts’ about Mwea that were not true, while failing to see the special advantages Mwea had enjoyed. Robert had excellent connections in the Kenya government and took his doubts to the decision-makers. They did not agree: the Tana River’s Bura project went forward. It would become a disaster, just as we forecast, for which the World Bank’s irrigation planners must share some of the blame.

What were, however, the major lessons we each took away from our shared experiences at Mwea? First, it had become obvious that neither the exhaustive review of files (that Robert had done) nor the large, multi-subject field surveys I carried out gave policy-makers the crucial data they needed when weighting new options. Robert would go on to pioneer Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA; Chambers, 1981b), which then morphed through several versions into participatory appraisal and then learning and action (Chambers, 1994a) represented by various acronyms (see Chapters 22 and 23). He also championed Ilchman’s idea of ‘optimal ignorance’: the notion that policy analysts must decide which unknowns can be left uninvestigated in order to direct crucial intelligence effort towards the really important questions (Ilchman and Uphoff, 1969, p256–272; also Ilchman, 1972). In actual rural development decisions of necessity, rough and ready estimates usually substitute for scientifically proven results.

Second, it had become apparent that any effort at assisting agricultural development that must provide the entire livelihoods for new recruits as their entitlements, must necessarily become very expensive. If, as at Bura, the sponsoring agency must then also pay for creating the usual government services, a settlement scheme becomes doubly expensive and doubly jeopardized. In contrast to rival policies, such as land titling (which the Kenya government had underway across central Kenya), land settlement cannot compete on a unit cost basis. Thus it becomes a poor choice of development policy for any impoverished country. Furthermore, for its success, it demands relatively effective support services and a crop with a secure market – two advantages at Mwea that other Kenyan schemes did not share (Chambers, 1973).

Third, we saw clearly at Mwea that outcomes from development can be very different for men and women – a major blind spot within development thinking in the 1960s, which of course has now been fully addressed by Robert’s colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton (Kabeer, 1994). Robert’s later book *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b), for example, explores this disconnect within development efforts. We also began to realize the hidden health costs that irrigation usually imposes on farmers’ families, a cost still often ignored by economic planners.

Fourth, Robert saw that it will be the staff at the contact level in any service delivery system whose actions largely influence what actually happens, and thus how ‘beneficiaries’ regard a development project. In African administration, the contact staff were (and are) usually the ones least supported, least trained, least rewarded and so least motivated to achieve official objectives, as shown by David

Leonard's work on Kenya's agricultural extension system (1977). No wonder 'rent seeking' becomes their usual mode of response! At Mwea, the scheme had a small farmer training centre, but it made little use of it because the technology was all 'top-down' driven. 'My' farmers had interesting comments about certain pests and weeds they encountered, but such information held no interest to the harassed 'junior staff' who dealt with farmers. Indeed, the scheme management was quite surprised that Robert even wanted a picture of all the junior staff to put in our book (see Chambers and Moris, 1973, plate six). The staff pictured were drivers and mechanics – there were no real 'extension' staff as we might call them in this system. This inability of specialized agronomists to learn from farmers became an abiding preoccupation for Robert, bearing fruit in the *Farmer First* books (Chambers et al, 1989a; Scoones and Thompson, 1994, 2009), and in the farmers first-and-last model for technology generation (Chambers and Jiggins, 1987a, b; Jiggins, also Chapter 15).

Fifth, we had seen first-hand that the economic benefits from major investment projects occur much more slowly than economists predict. This means that participants, as well as the sponsoring agency and the larger economy, do not see actual benefits until decades after an investment has been made. Relying on economic advice comes, then, with serious political costs when promises cannot be met. Robert would become a life-long sceptic about economists and their promises. Our study paralleled the rise (and later fall) of project appraisal as a magic bullet technology within the World Bank. Having seen just how far off base management's ideas were regarding farmers' welfare, we assumed (correctly) that project appraisal usually generates false ideas about likely benefits. Yes, at Mwea, benefits eventually arrived – a decade late!

Sixth, Robert would also abandon his search for better implementation technologies as the key to effective rural development, something he still believed in when I met him and that he tried to perfect with Deryke Belshaw in their project implementation management (PIM) system of the early 1970s (Chambers, 1974; also Chapter 4). Poor people around the globe can be grateful for this change of heart and vision: Robert's *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983) was a very different product than his 1974 book.

Lastly, Robert would increasingly investigate how poor people actually perceived the many initiatives undertaken supposedly to benefit them. He would insist in that 'simple is optimal' (Chambers, 1978), but then go on to question whether 'uppers' who determine investments even know the actual circumstances of those they think they assist. In reality, until people themselves own and use their perceived information, most top-down effort will be wasted – the theme in several of Robert's later books, initially articulated in his 1983 classic *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*: still the *one* book for 'beginners'.

## WHAT REALLY MATTERS

As for me, looking back at a very hectic and trying apprenticeship in central Kenya, what strikes me now is that the various major books we struggled so hard to create had almost no impact within our field. This contrasts dramatically with Robert's later works. For me, the Mwea book was an enormous task and yet hardly anyone seemed to read it. Its major policy lessons were ignored in Kenya. What I did not see then, as a beginner, was that one's personal relations with colleagues and students are what really matters.

From among those 13 Makerere trainees would come one manager of the scheme itself (the young man who interviewed those Kamba farmers and married one of their daughters), a general manager of the National Irrigation Board, a head of the Tana and Athi River Development Authority, and the University of Nairobi's first Kenyan Professor of Sociology, Philip Mbithi, who then became Vice-Chancellor and eventually the head of the Kenyan Civil Service. My students became senior civil servants in East Africa's Ministries of Agriculture: good people in imperfect systems. Robert's students and colleagues can be found around the world: he would influence an entire generation in viewing how to go about rural development. The people Robert and I worked with went on to outstanding careers; they are our true legacy. I suppose that is Robert's ultimate lesson: in development, people count for more than the technology or the models. *Farmer First*, indeed.



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# The Path from Managerialism to Participation: The Kenyan Special Rural Development Programme

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*David K. Leonard*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-4

## MANAGING RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Special Rural Development Programme (SRDP) in Kenya marked a critical juncture in Robert Chambers' intellectual development, although some of the effects were not to become evident for several years. SRDP marks as well a juncture in general donor practice, although it probably did not cause it. So both for general and particular reasons, it is worth exploring what happened to Robert over SRDP.

Robert's career until the mid-1970s had been focused exclusively on East Africa – and that career had been heavily managerial in orientation. Not only had he been a colonial District Officer (DO) (see Chapter 5) and then a trainer of the new crop of Kenyan DOs (see Chapter 6), but his doctoral research at Manchester had focused on the managerial aspects of the Mwea Irrigation Scheme (Chambers, 1969). When he was hired by the Institute for Development Studies in Nairobi to work on the evaluation of SRDP, it was as manager of the team of academics (of which I was one) who were supporting the project. Robert's major publication from the SRDP years was *Managing Rural Development: Ideas and Experience from East Africa* (Chambers, 1974), which promoted the project implementation management (PIM) system he developed with the economist Deryke Belshaw for the SRDP. This was a highly managerial piece of work and largely focused on coordinating the decentralized administrators who were doing the local planning and implementation for SRDP. This book and the Robert of this era is dramatically different from the Robert who is known today for his promotion of various ways

of stimulating citizen participation in development planning and implementation. What happened?

Robert himself says there was no ‘revelation on the road to Damascus’ that prompted his fundamental change in approach, but looking back we can see that many of the seeds of slow growth that produced the ‘new, improved Chambers’ were planted late in the SRDP years. What were they?

First and foremost, SRDP came at the juncture where the realities of development finance for small countries were undergoing radical change. The British Empire (and the other European varieties) sought to make sure that colonies broke even financially. It was hoped that these new states might create a framework in which various economic enterprises owned by citizens of the colonizer generated profits, but at a minimum they should impose no burden on the Treasury in the metropole. Colonial officers took seriously the need to balance state-building and development initiatives against the tax revenues that could be raised within the country. Robert and the other ex-colonial officers working with SRDP were earnest in their continued commitment to this constraint.

SRDP was mandated as a set of development experiments that, when successful, were to be replicated over the country as a whole. Thus ‘replicability’ was core to the SRDP mission and in the view of the British officers working with it that meant that no pattern should be set that could not eventually be financed out of regular Kenyan tax revenues. Thus Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) might be used for government ‘capital’ expenses but never for ‘recurrent’ ones (which were represented by different budgets). Similar strictures had been in force and accepted in India for 20 years, for the country was so large that it was inconceivable that any outside source of finance could ever bear the burden of development work for the whole country for very long.

In practice, however, Kenya and other small and moderate-sized African nations had entered a brave new world of ‘replicability’ (today we might say ‘sustainability’). They were small enough that Western donors really could finance development activities for a country as a whole (as Tanzania’s integrated regional development programme subsequently illustrated; Kleemeier, 1985); the competition with the USSR for votes in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly provided the incentive for them to do so; and the conception of how state development activities should be financed was changing. The Western powers were beginning to internalize the fact that strong states and markets in Africa and elsewhere provided a part of the fuel for very profitable global trade and that it therefore was reasonable not to tax just African citizens to finance them but also Western businesses at home benefiting from globalization. The colonial ‘subsidy’ finally became legitimate in the metropole. This change led to open ODA for ‘recurrent’ expenditures in the 1980s and even ‘direct budget support’ (untied to specific projects) by the 1990s.

Robert and the other British officers working on SRDP sought to keep SRDP within the bounds of the old conceptions of ‘replicability’. In doing so, they found themselves in an emotionally charged battle with other academics (especially those

trained in the US<sup>1</sup>) and Kenyan officers, who felt that SRDP should be able to spend at whatever level the donors were willing to support and that those who resisted such generous finance were seeking only to 'hold Kenyans back'. This was an ideological battle that no ex-colonial officer could hope to win in the first decade after independence. Robert (justifiably in my opinion) felt abused at the *ad hominem* turn taken by this struggle and vowed never to take on administrative responsibility again. This vow greatly strengthened his publications, intellectual freedom and popularity for the rest of his career.

The bigger juncture that this academic 'food fight' manifested, however, was a major shift in the conception of how services and economic development activities in smaller poor countries should be financed. To my knowledge, this critical juncture was never explicitly acknowledged but the 'new replicability' quickly became the rule and remains so to this day. On the one hand, the norm does mean that 'northerners' who profit from globalized trade are legitimately and permanently being taxed to make 'southern states' viable parts of the global economy that imperialism forged a century and more before. Virtually no one thinks any longer that overseas development aid is a temporary palliative that will disappear into activities financed solely by 'southern' taxes once 'take-off' into development has occurred.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, donor finance has become a new resource that 'southern' state elites can capture for their own benefit with little *visible or direct* pain being imposed on their own poor citizens. Thus, overseas development aid has become another aspect of the 'natural resource curse' in many countries, sustaining predatory political elites and producing growth rates lower than those otherwise possible.

SRDP was not just about 'replicable' development activity, however. A second feature came from its growth out of the then fashionable idea that effective development planning and activity needed to be based on a holistic and integrated approach. The Jan Tinbergens and W. W. Rostows ruled the intellectual roost and Albert Hirschman's call for 'unbalanced' economic development was still a voice in the wilderness (Hirschman, 1958). Integrated rural development was to remain fashionable throughout the 1970s. Even while writing with Deryke Belshaw on how coordinated development activity could be administered, however, Robert had begun to perceive within the SRDP the heavy costs in time and effort to coordination (Chambers, 2005b [1969]). At least with regard to implementation, he led the long-march of the development community out of its commitment to comprehensive, integrated development.

Third, as recounted by Jon Moris (Chapter 3), Robert became disillusioned with the ability of standard academic research (particularly of the survey variety) to assist in development policy-making and implementation. It was too complicated, ambitious and obsessed with precise measurement to produce relevant answers in the time frame that development practice requires. Robert perceived that social scientists were often trying to make very precise assessments of development reality when practice required only approximate and quick answers to these same

questions. This led him to become a vigorous proponent of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), in which quick missions to collect information from key informants and targeted meetings of rural dwellers substituted for research at the standard on which the academy insisted (Chambers, 1981b).

In many ways, this practice was a reversion to Robert's practice as a colonial DO. He often sang the virtues of the foot safari and camping as the best methods for finding out what is really happening in the rural area. And he complained that the more transport improved, the more it enabled post-colonial officers to flit along the major roads in the dry season and to skip back to the comfort of the towns in the evenings, depriving them of the very best insights into the realities of rural life (Chambers, 1983). By a different path Robert had rediscovered the methods of rural research Mao Tse-Tung proclaimed in his famous 1930 essay 'Oppose book worship' (1971). This scepticism regarding academic research, the re-embrace of intense rural field experience and his commitment to RRA all were leading him toward the dedicated advocate of participatory appraisal he eventually became.

## RESEARCH RIGOUR

All of these paths in and out of RRA were positive, but I personally feel that Robert over-generalized from his negative experiences with classic academic development research in SRDP. My own appraisal is somewhat more nuanced. I do think that Robert (and Mao) are right about the dangers of academic research for development practice. The questions that are most pressing for the developing world are different from those in privileged 'northern' university departments. As a consequence, the senior, hiring professors in the north, since they do not fully appreciate the urgency of the questions addressed by those working in the 'south', often focus on the sophistication of the research methodology used in a study rather than the insight it generates. This leads young researchers to 'over-measure' and to 'kill fleas with sledge hammers', at great expense in human resources, time and readability.

Robert is right that measurement needs to be proportionate to the range of variation that is important to development practice. The subsequent history of management information systems (MISs) also demonstrates that surveys that set out to answer all the important questions that might arise most often answer none of them (Dery, 1981). Big, comprehensive surveys have proved disappointing at best and a waste of resources at worst. Furthermore, Robert is right when he says that a social scientist who undertakes to do a sample survey when a decision-maker asks a question will usually produce answers only long after they are no longer relevant and the deciders have moved on to other questions.

Nonetheless, rigorous research still can be highly useful for policy-making if it passes some important tests. First, it must anticipate and precede the decision-makers quest for policy-relevant answers, so that the research is *completed* before the policy-makers and implementers ask for it. At a minimum, this means that

rigorous academic research will be policy-relevant only if it is anticipating major social trends or if it is addressing problems we know will have a long shelf-life. There was research undertaken under SRDP that did come to have policy importance – but only later. Joe Ascroft and Niels Röling gained important insights on the nature of extension packages that were likely to meet the needs of Kenyan farmers. But this innovation took a while to come to fruition (Ascroft et al, 1973). My own research on the management of Kenyan agricultural extension became the foundation for a set of important reforms in that ministry and has influenced understanding of development administration far beyond East Africa – but only a decade after I finished the project and the SRDP evaluation unit had been shut down (Leonard, 1977).

Second, it does take meticulous research to uncover the hidden structure of many problems. My own research on agricultural extension found patterns of subordinate staff behaviour of which supervisors were completely unaware. But there must be time in the policy process for such investigations to proceed and the problems must be worth the attention.

Thus, third, the value of discovering what is new must be balanced against the importance of focusing on the parts of the development puzzle that are in the greatest need of critical illumination in an ongoing policy process. Eventually I was able to produce a three-district survey of veterinary staff behaviour and the views of farmers and herders about them, together with analysis and a report, in only two and a half months! (Leonard, 1987). For policy research, that kind of turnaround should be our ideal but it took me a decade of experience before I could achieve it. Sometimes we need to invest our patience in such methodological learning so we can use its benefits later.

## THE SEEDS OF PARTICIPATORY APPRAISAL

To return to Robert and his commitment to participatory appraisal, we can see its seeds in his experiences with the SRDP. But the shoots did not sprout immediately. In the early 1980s, Robert undertook research on the management of major canal irrigation schemes in Sri Lanka that took a managerial, resource-economizing approach similar to his earlier Kenyan work (Chambers, 1980a; see Chapter 16). Ironically this research was undertaken only shortly before Norman Uphoff launched his highly participatory approach to the Gal Oya irrigation scheme, also in Sri Lanka (Uphoff, 1992).

What took Robert ultimately to his well-known participatory insights and methods was a product not of sudden revelations, but of a deep dedication to development for the poor, self-reflection, an eagerness to learn and a willingness to admit past mistakes. Such a path should be an encouragement to all of us, for neither heroism nor brilliance is required (although it is not precluded either). Years ago, I found myself with a secondary school classmate who had campaigned for

Richard Nixon for president in 1960 and then later spent four years in prison rather than cooperate with conscription into the US army for the war in Vietnam. When I gently teased him about this incongruity in his personal history, he responded that it actually demonstrated that *anyone* can eventually see the light about what is morally required of them. And that is what Robert's story demonstrates as well.

## NOTES

- 1 I was so focused on my own work that I was largely innocent of this struggle at the time and played no significant role in it – on either side.
- 2 Jeffrey Sachs and his disciples alone seem to still believe in this 1950s formulation of W. W. Rostow's thesis.

# Foxes and Hedgehogs – and Lions: Whose Reality Prevails?

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*Paul Spencer*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-5

Dear Robert,

At last I have an opportunity to respond to your kind gift of *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b) – and to try and answer your question.

Attempting this takes me back to our very different types of involvement as novices among the Samburu of northern Kenya around 1960. As a social anthropologist, I found our conversations invigorating and valued your hospitable encouragement as a District Officer to voice my criticisms of the colonial record. A key interest that we shared at that time has a bearing on your book. This concerned the nature of decision-making among the Samburu, and this was amplified when I later turned my attention to their cousins, the Maasai and also to the Chamus, where our paths indirectly crossed a second time.

## **PUBLIC CONSENSUS AND PRIVATE ANXIETIES**

In *Whose Reality Counts?*, your depiction of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) conjures up memories of formal debates among Samburu elders. These allowed all points of view to be expressed, but only one at a time, inhibiting private disputes or sustained interruptions. Their discussions would take place in the shade of a large acacia tree, and this provided an analogy for the process of arriving at any decision. They pointed out that the branches of an acacia tree were like the different views expressed by various elders on some vexed topic. They would argue these out with no fixed agenda or limitation on their time until they arrived at some consensus –

like the trunk that bound all the branches together. The decision was then blessed in an invocation to God by an elder of the oldest age-set present.

In your book, you adopt Archilochus's metaphor, contrasting creative *foxes* with fundamentalist *hedgehogs* (Chambers, 1997b, p163). In this vein, the Samburu elders were behaving like *foxes*, with many ideas that contributed towards the resolution to their problem. This may fall short of the PRA ideal, in that these debates excluded all women and younger men, but it does express a compromised version and reflects the embedded gender and age divisions that characterized Samburu society. In my mind's ear, I can hear Samburu elders pointing out that their wives are merely *hedgehogs* (*injolis*) with just one big idea – a single-minded desire to keep having children linked to a widespread concern for their fertility – while they, the elders as *foxes* (*isiron*), have a broader and more mature understanding of the world with robust ways of thinking and responding. This displayed an alternative fundamentalism, of course, regarding their wives as 'children', and disregarding any contribution that their points of view could make towards the debate (Chambers, 1997b, p88).

Samburu women's anxiety over their fertility was expressed in their dancing, and this is a theme that has been reported more widely in the region and other parts of Africa. This touches on another area of concern: population growth in underdeveloped areas. You note this, but I am less reassured by your evidence of some kind of balance between population growth and economic development (Chambers, 1997b, pp24–26, p31). In East Africa, the official 2009 estimate of the annual growth rate is 2.45 per cent. This may seem containable at first sight, but it implies a doubling of the human population every 29 years with no end in sight. Even in areas as remote as Samburu, I estimated an annual growth rate of 2.3 per cent in 1973 for a clan that by definition excluded immigrants (Spencer, 1998, p214). As a global phenomenon, this presents an ethical Pandora's Box. World powers may confer over climate change or global financial crises, and they may just conceivably have some impact in sorting these out. But can you conceive of a situation where there might be some global consensus on population limitation? You note that poorer sectors adopt a robust strategy to cope with their poverty in the long term (Chambers, 1997b, p175). Yet one of these robust approaches is to aspire to large families as a safeguard for their old age. To assume that the pace of economic development will match population growth is speculative, especially in a world that is running short of fossil fuels. Redistributing global resources could buy valuable time but it would not address the basic problem. Nor can we safely assume that birth rates and poverty traps are set to diminish over time. With population growth at this rate, the escalation of natural and man-made disasters seems set to continue. At a local level, how would a PRA facilitator handle a discourse on this issue, I wonder? Public debates do not necessarily dispel private anxieties.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF DECISION-MAKING

Turning to the Maasai, decision-making follows a similar pattern to the Samburu, but on a grander scale. Maasai *moran* (young men) are encouraged to adopt a debating discipline as a key to their ‘warrior’ organization and as a training for consensual action when they become elders. Any group of age mates with a shared interest will choose their most astute member to act on their behalf as their representative or ‘feather’ (*enkopiro*) in the wider debate. This analogy refers to the ostrich feather headdress that encircled the head of a Maasai warrior, rather as these representatives surround the eloquent and influential figure, the head or spokesman for the whole community – advising him but also holding him to account if he falls short of their democratic expectations. The ‘head’ should be the last to express an opinion, having weighed up all the arguments. This provides an institutionalized framework, both for arriving at wide-ranging decisions relevant to a broad community, and for acting on them afterwards – considering differences of opinion in the first instance, and inhibiting dissent after a decision has been reached.

You describe PRA as a means of arriving at such decisions after informed debate, but does it build on locally established institutional practices to arrive at and pursue resolutions? Your book criticizes the institutional assumptions and practices of those in power (Chambers, 1997b, pp 221–222) and a table refers to building up local institutions in the longer term (Chambers, 1997b, p115), but you appear to overlook the resilience of *existing* local institutions in community dynamics and the necessity of working through them to facilitate development.

With respect, while *Whose Reality Counts?* is disarmingly self-critical, it reads as though PRA is seeking to wipe the slate clean before building up a new rapport, overlooking the rich and creative significance of local institutions that are themselves products of local cultures and capable of modifying with changing circumstances.

## INSTITUTIONALIZED ADAPTABILITY

The robustness of indigenous decision-making leads me to consider the Chamus, who belong to the same cluster as the Samburu and Maasai. Here, I am concerned with bottom-up development as opposed to the Chamus encounter with the alternative approach that you have dissected elsewhere (Chambers, 1973, see Chapter 3).

Historically the Chamus have experienced a string of changes in their social organization associated with in-migrations and an increasingly mixed economy, spanning an indefinite period (Spencer, 1998, pp129–204). Taking their oral history at face value, they were originally hunter-gatherers in the vicinity of Lake Baringo. They then adopted irrigation farming, which spread to cover an impressive

area. Then they were joined by impoverished Samburu from the north and acquired pastoralist skills from these Samburu, who settled among them and recovered their herds by raiding. This led to an amalgamation of the age and clanship systems of these two peoples. However, the Chamus were geographically closer to the Maasai, and it was from Maasai that they developed their institutions further, adopting the Maasai warrior village system.

As the growing caravan trade carved its niche across the region, the Chamus villages played a significant role in providing food supplies and became a recognized trading post. Then in 1917–1918, their principal irrigation system was destroyed by a flash flood, caused by overgrazing (Chambers, 1973, p346) or by over-exploiting the irrigation system in response to the opportunities of the caravan trade (Anderson, 1988, pp250–254), or perhaps both. This led to a further shift towards pastoralism, while their farming diversified in response to the external market with patchy success, leading to sporadic reliance on famine relief.

The significant point here is not the details of how these changes came about, but the mechanism whereby the Chamus elders maintained control over these changes. Developing and maintaining their irrigation system required a collective discipline, and this was enforced by a council of elders, which consisted of all household heads. Attendance at their meetings was compulsory and any breach of a decision by the council was a punishable offence. As among the Samburu and Maasai, the deliberations of the council only concluded when an extended discussion of all points of view led to a unanimous decision, whether this was achieved through majority coercion or sheer exhaustion.

The Chamus council most probably had its origin in the development of the irrigation system, but significantly it did not end there. According to Chamus elders, each transition in their economy was mulled over by their council, maintaining an overarching control based on democratic principles, with the age-set of *morani* available to support their decisions when necessary. The richness of their oral history was matched by the sanctity and practicality of their system. Once again, the implication here is of an indigenous institution for decision-making, backed by public opinion in order to maintain their system and adapt to new realities.

Your critique of more recent top-down development among the Chamus (Chambers, 1973) raises an awkward question. How far can local cultures and institutions adapt to any development agency that espouses different premises, and vice versa? Suppose the agency requires women and younger men to be consulted and values their input, whereas this is alien to the local elders, who regard themselves as the custodians of their society and way of life (Chambers, 1997b, p88, pp213–214). They see themselves as shrewd *foxes*, and any ideological challenge to their custodianship may be regarded as the fundamentalist bigotry of some narrow-minded *hedgehog* (and again vice versa). To put this another way, can there ever be a totally unblinkered, culture-free approach to PRA from above or below? Coining your idiom:

*Can there be any solution  
Without some institution?  
Or any institutional promise  
Without a fundamental premise?* (Chambers, 1997b)

## THE PROBLEM OF SUBVERSION

Bearing in mind Archilochus's metaphor of *hedgehogs and foxes*, we may shift the focus to consider Pareto's *foxes and lions*. This involves a switch from a question of insight to one of integrity, providing a different slant on the character of the *foxes*. Let us call these respectively *wise foxes* after Archilochus and *sly foxes* after Pareto. For Pareto's *sly foxes*, their wide variety of experience and perceptiveness feeds their cunning in the devious pursuit of self-interest. In this metaphor, *sly foxes* are portrayed as scheming innovators and are opposed to *lions*, who are essentially loyal to broader social ideals and strong enough to pursue these. But faced with the complexity of human nature and innovation, *lions* are vulnerable to the scheming manipulations of *sly foxes*. *Lions* are the backbone of an establishment, but in effect they have the underbellies of *hedgehogs*.

This switch of metaphor is well illustrated in Peter Little's striking study of more recent development among the Chamus. Little (1992) traces the penetration of capitalism into the local economy following the privatization of land in post-colonial Kenya. This provided an opportunity for a new generation of Chamus innovators – the Paretoian *sly foxes* – who broke ranks and systematically acquired land and stock from impoverished Chamus and then further exploited them as cheap labour.

Turning to your comments on the success of PRA, this seems to assume that participants collaborate as *wise foxes* and then maintain their PRA gains as trusting and trustworthy *lions* (Chambers, 1997b, p199, p208–209). Plato's *Republic* was very close in some ways to your model and sought to cope with a more complex range of basic personality types than we have considered here. Plato's solution was in effect to take those retired warriors/*moran* that had proved to be *lions* or *wise foxes*, and to sit them at the high table as a privileged elite over those unsuited to govern. Your model, on the other hand, is slanted towards a universal concord of goodwill, with no high table and suppressing or ostracizing any suggestion of rival agendas.

Yet surely, all these metaphorical guises – *sly foxes* and *hedgehogs* included – are aspects of our persona, shifting with context. You endorse a popular criticism against Freud (Chambers, 1997b, pp77–78, pp82–83), but it was he who led us to understand the manipulative infantile *sly fox* that lies buried in the human condition, and indeed the ambiguities of character more generally that are inadvertently revealed in our behaviour. Frustration may tempt *wise foxes* to become more sly, and it may turn *lions* into *hedgehogs*. *Sly foxes* in youth may become *lions* and pillars of the establishment as they mature, and then staid *hedgehogs* as they age

in a changing world. And indeed this resembles the Maasai elders' view of their age system, with *moran* cast as *sly foxes*, filching their stock and seducing their young wives. Maasai wives in general reverse the order, regarding *moran* as glamorous *lions* and their husbands as *sly foxes*. It is because we are so vulnerable to the many sides of our personality that the very basic teachings that lead us towards adulthood are couched in terms of the fundamental strictures of *hedgehogs* that you criticize (Chambers, 1997b, pp59–62), aimed at confining some of our more basic instincts and fostering the *lion* and *wise fox* within us to mature.

### THE CLASH OF FUNDAMENTALS AND THE PRAGMATICS OF COMPROMISE

Your model presumes an inherent and thoroughly open-minded altruism, free from cultural assumptions or self-seeking motives (Chambers, 1997b). But can a PRA-inspired transition that has been achieved in a general spirit of compromise survive in the longer term? Pareto's analysis of history envisaged the rule of *lions* as vulnerable to the manipulation of *sly foxes*, who replaced them as the governing elite until they in turn were overthrown by a re-emergence of *lions* in an endless cycle. In the Maasai model, aggressive younger age-sets replace ageing senior age-sets until they too age and are replaced. But can this guarantee a continuity of the original PRA ideals, especially as times change and new leaders emerge with their own agendas (Chambers, 1997b)?

Again, how would a new system cope with a major crisis of confidence? You suggest that PRA innovations are infectious, building on one another positively (Chambers, 1997b). This seems reminiscent at first sight of the growth of Maasai group ranches. From diffident beginnings, these seemed to have growing popularity among the Maasai. However, their boundaries were challenged at critical times by the pressure for flexibility in the face of drought and growing populations, and they would give way to the overarching principle that all their land belonged to *all* Maasai. Eventually, it became clear that the increasing attraction of new group ranches had been prompted by a fear of losing newly acquired land rights if they did not join. Here, there was a clash of two fundamental principles: traditional claims in sharing land as against the environmental need to protect this land from overgrazing.

The success of PRA initiatives described in the pages of *Whose Reality Counts?* brings hope that life in rural areas stands a chance of adapting locally to environmental problems if attempts at higher levels have failed to produce a solution. PRA is clearly in tune with upbringings that seek to restrict our very basic self-centred instincts in order to participate as social beings in problems that are ultimately social. This points towards a collective compromise with reality, expressed in the image of a Maasai warrior's feather headdress. While local institutions are capable of changing, they are embedded in local cultures that

provide their local legitimacy and are the best hope for containing the *sly foxes*. Could you envisage a PRA initiative that is equally prepared to meet these existing institutions halfway in a spirit of compromise? Would you be prepared to respect some of their fundamentalism in order to legitimize the search towards some tangible result? Each step forward is a compromise with reality, and in answer to the question posed in your title, I suggest that this compromise is the post-colonial reality that really counts.

May the Samburu bestow on you a more effective blessing than I could possibly hope to emulate, my old friend.



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# Administration and Development

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*Colin Fuller*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-6

## THE TRANSITION FROM COLONIALISM

In 1961, the new Kenya government set up the Kenya Institute of Administration (KIA) to train African Administrative Officers of the new Provincial Administration and Ministries of Central Government, government executive cadres, local government officers, cooperative department officers and community development officers. Robert Chambers and I had been working as District Officers (DOs) under the colonial administration, and were recruited by Eric Gordon, the Director, to be training officers for the African DO's courses at the KIA.

The subjects covered included law, accounting, government procedures, natural resources, making district plans and public administration. The courses covered all major ministries and departments, from district to central levels (Fuller, 2002). This was a critical part of the process of decolonization. Robert recalls the period:

*It is difficult to convey to others the exhilaration of the decolonizing experience in Kenya. As a district officer I would have been seen by some as a wicked colonialist. I am not here defending or glossing any of the outrages of colonialism. But the task then was to prepare for independence and one could not have wished for a better job. (Chambers, 2005c, p69)*

Robert goes on to describe his job at the KIA:

*[I] was responsible for three back-to-back six-month courses for Kenyan administrators who were taking over. This was an extraordinarily intense experience, innovating and improvising on the run, and*

*beginning to learn how to avoid having to lecture: this was anyway essential as I did not know enough about anything to be able to talk about it for any length of time. The last course of twenty-four graduates straight from university, mainly Makerere in Uganda, challenged ('Why do we need to climb Kilimanjaro in order to be able to run our country?') but did not subvert the somewhat muscular approach of the training, which stressed character and self-confidence. (Chambers, 2005c, p70)*

## TRAINING NEW ADMINISTRATORS

In his work as a trainer of African administrators, Robert made two major contributions. The first was in the content and use of case studies for trainees who, by the end of 1962, were on two separate courses. One group comprised officers, mainly in their early 30s, whose education was generally no higher than School Certificate, but who had several years of field experience. The other group comprised recent graduates in their mid-20s, mostly with arts degrees from Makerere in Uganda, whose field experience as DOs was no more than a few months. Although at that time there were no job descriptions for the work of a DO in the provincial administration or for an assistant secretary in a ministry, the main abilities that would be required were to be able to handle paperwork expeditiously, make decisions at a policy level, write minutes and letters concisely and analyse and respond to difficult problems in files.

Generally, case studies used for training in both private and public organizations were written by the trainers and were mostly fictitious, even when based on real situations and were often transparently artificial. Robert's answer to this was, with the permission and help of the Ministry of State for Constitutional Affairs and Administration, to use current files, photostatting each folio and typing it on a stencil, including any handwritten comments, written legibly and, in almost all cases, retaining the actual names of people involved. Many of the officers handling the files were known to the trainees and were considerably senior to them. Sometimes ministers were involved and, in one case study, President Mzee Kenyatta, whose terse comment was there for all to see!

The trainees were required, individually, to identify issues, determine questions of fact, law or professional ethics, firstly role-playing an assistant secretary and later, as the study unfolded, more senior roles up to and including that of a permanent secretary. As Robert regularly returned to the ministry to copy the latest contents, the training materials would grow. Different aspects would then be discussed or memoranda written by the trainees who, a few days later, would be able to see the decision that was actually taken by an officer dealing with the actual file and the way he presented the facts or wrote a letter dealing with a problem. The trainees could hardly wait to see the next instalment and discover the extent to which their

own analysis or solution to a problem agreed with or differed from that which the official actually involved had dealt with the matter.<sup>1</sup>

The second innovation that Robert brought to the Advanced Public Administration Courses was the District Development Projects (DDPs). Since these courses were only six months in length, they had to be highly selective in subjects taught, as well as intense. It was essential that the DDPs be as practical as possible. Prior to their introduction to the syllabus, the training of the administrative officers had comprised economic theory, natural resources, planning, statistics and the development of Kenya's economy. These had been studied in lectures, with end-of-course projects that did not last more than a week and were usually confined to single topics. These projects were exercises in observation rather than analysis and did not require thinking in-depth or decision-taking on the scale that would be required of the officers when taking up their posts in the provincial administration or a ministry.

The end-of-course project exercise was taken out of the programme and, in its place, three weeks were devoted to the DDP. It required the cooperation of almost all the departments in central government, with experts in government budgetary policy, survey, forestry, agricultural settlement, aspects of veterinary science and animal husbandry coming to lecture and answer questions at the KIA. They and their departments were also available for visits by the course members to obtain information and statistics about the district on which their DDP was to be based.

The main purpose of the DDP was to enable course members to confront the problems of rural development and stimulate them to discuss, decide on and draw up detailed plans for development. In many important respects, the DDPs were precursors to Rapid Rural Appraisal, which Robert promoted later (Chambers, 1981b). Since course members knew that they would have to undertake the DDP at the end of the course, it gave them incentive to learn as much as they could during sessions earlier in the programme. The DDP required the participants to consult and dig information out of files, to ask the right questions, to obtain and analyse statistics, to work in committees, draft estimates and write reports. All this in two days preparation at the KIA, followed by 12 days of safari, living under canvas with foot safaris often in difficult country and a final four days back at the KIA analysing data, discussing with colleagues, and writing reports often late into the evenings. This required significant mental and physical stamina. It was, for most of the participants, the first time that they had been put under such pressure, but it definitely challenged and excited them.

The safari element was preceded by a flight with the Kenya Air Force in a Beverly aircraft in which the Canadian Air Force were instructing Kenya pilots and navigators. This included a pass at 5000ft (1524m) over the district chosen for the DDP and then at 500ft (152m) so that the course members had a bird's-eye view of the type of country they would be visiting and planning for. This was a wonderful way to start the safari element of the DDP and illustrates the flair that Robert had for organizing training that would be relevant, practical, challenging and exciting.<sup>2</sup>

The courses were also highly influential. As Robert would later recall: ‘For better or worse these were probably the most influential six months of my life (several on the courses were permanent secretaries in under two years)’ (Chambers, 2005c, p70).

Working with Robert opened my eyes to the fact that the best training is that which engages the learner as much as possible, in areas that are directly relevant to his or her needs. With reference to public administration and development, Robert’s case studies, their content and the way he used them and the DDPs did those things and, importantly, his methodology motivated the course members to a degree that I have never observed elsewhere. He was a real role model for the consummate trainer.

### COMMUNICATING WITH CLARITY

I should also mention his writing that, like his training methods, has influenced me greatly. Firstly, the succinctness of his writing, of which one of his earliest publications, *Managing Rural Development: Ideas and Experience from East Africa* (Chambers, 1974), is a good example. Too many academic text books are unnecessarily long and are written in a style that overemphasizes the complexity of a subject. Robert is a communicator who writes in a direct, simple style, which makes it relatively easy for his reader to understand what he is trying to say.

Too many of my own students, many of them with considerable experience in development administration, were dismayed to find that they could not understand the gobbledegook written by some academics. Robert’s writing has always stressed the practical aspects of his subject and its most critical elements, namely the human being in the process of implementation and the local inhabitant, especially the rural peasant farmer, as the recipient.

### A TEAM PLAYER

During our time at the KIA, Robert lived in a small house on the KIA campus, about 100 yards from where I lived with my wife, down the hill below some maize shambas. I can remember sitting on his verandah, drinking Tusker beer and discussing the dilemmas of development. Should land usage by-laws, for example, be used to enforce bench terracing of steep land if used for agriculture? Was fencing the Maasai pasturelands necessary to control disease and thereby improve native livestock? We agreed that, in the long term, development efforts were for the benefit of the indigenous people and, therefore, we should continue to be involved in them.

Not only was Robert a thoughtful colleague, and a good partner in such debates, as well as an inspiring trainer and writer, but he was also an excellent colleague and team player. For example, as a renowned climber he had helped a Kenyan African to the top of Mount Kenya to place a beacon at the break of

Independence Day. He was also, it should be noted, a highly valued member of the KIA staff volleyball team! He was, in addition, a committed colleague, always sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Two examples come to mind: firstly, when the post of Vice-Principal at the KIA was advertised he came to tell me that he would be applying. He suspected, quite rightly, that I would also be applying and he did not wish me to feel that he had been in any way disloyal to me, since I had been at the KIA slightly longer than him. A second occasion was when he sent me a photocopy of an advertisement from the *Daily Telegraph* of a post at Manchester University that he thought I might be interested in. Although I had not been looking for work in the UK, I had seen through the transition to an African colleague as head of the Department of Public Administration, and I was ready to move on.

It was therefore Robert's initiative that led to me spending the last 30 years of my working life as a trainer of people from developing countries at Manchester University, where the inspiration and enthusiasm, as well as the training approaches, that were developed by Robert in Kenya lived on.

## NOTES

- 1 There was much more in the value of this approach to the use of case studies than can be gleaned from this brief description, see Chambers (1964) for a proper understanding of the innovation and its value.
- 2 A comprehensive description of the DDP and why Robert devised it, can be found in Fuller and Chambers (1965).



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# Participation in International Aid

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-7

## INTRODUCTION

I first heard of Robert Chambers in 1978, when I was employed in Sudan in a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) role in a United Nations (UN) non-formal education and skills training programme. My first task had been to design and implement a complicated and logistically burdensome, large-scale, random sample, baseline household survey of the ‘target population’. Other than for the street-traders, who used the completed schedules to make paper cones for selling groundnuts, the survey proved to be completely useless.

When lamenting on the pointlessness of this exercise to a UN colleague, he passed me a paper ‘Project selection for poverty-focused rural development: Simple is optimal’. In it I read that, ‘any evaluation of a method of project appraisal should be based not on its appearance, nor on the theory of how it should be applied, but on what happens in practice’ (Chambers, 1978, p212). This gave me the courage to stand up to my project manager and say ‘no more surveys’. I wrote to Robert about how much his paper had inspired me to trust my own judgement about what was relevant and feasible. His encouraging response and interest in what I was doing sharply contrasted with the indifference my head office showed to the participatory approaches I was beginning to experiment with.

A decade later, when I started working as a social development adviser to the British Overseas Development Administration – now the Department for International Development (DFID)<sup>1</sup> – Robert’s keen support and wise counsel was a refreshing difference from that of many of the other development academics I was meeting who made me feel as if I were someone with no ideas or knowledge worthy of consideration: I was just a practitioner, or worse, a boring civil servant. At academic conferences, I felt like a tolerated intruder in an alien environment.

In contrast, I gladly accepted invitations to workshops that Robert organized at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS); there I felt welcome as a full participant in a space that I was invited to help construct.

The quality of Robert's relationship with staff in international aid agencies is important for understanding his influence in encouraging such agencies to adopt more participatory ways of working. He saw us as champions and agents of institutional change; his encouragement, respect and interest in what we were doing made us ever keener to live up to his aspirations. In return, we were enthusiastic about funding him and his colleagues to take this work forward. As a result of Robert having inspired and encouraged internal champions of participation, many of the approaches and activities described in the different chapters in this book were financed by donor agencies. What this chapter aims to do is briefly trace the history of participation as an idea in international aid, with a focus on, but not exclusive reference to, British aid.

### **'PARTICIPATION' IN INTERNATIONAL AID**

That same colleague who introduced me to Robert's work also told me about community participation as the 'new' development idea, a notion that arrived in DFID in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> It was then that Britain began financing slum improvement projects in India with money earmarked for poverty reduction – unique in British aid at that time. Elsewhere, Britain did very few 'direct poverty reducing projects' with local communities (Wilmshurst et al, 1992) thus, it was in India that the ministry's two social development advisers had the best chance of making a case for community participation, using the argument that it gave a greater sense of ownership and therefore commitment to maintaining the investment.

In 1987, soon after I joined DFID, I became enthused to introduce participatory approaches to a large agricultural extension project it was considering funding in eastern India. I proposed to invite Robert to run a workshop in 1988 for the extension wing of the Hindustan Fertilizer Corporation (HFC), which was to be the project implementing agency. As I noted in my office daybook, my economist colleague agreed, provided Robert's visit 'does not challenge the project's underlying assumptions'. The positive reaction from the HFC encouraged Robert to approach DFID to co-finance – with the Ford Foundation and the Aga Khan Foundation – a secondment for two years at the Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad (1989–1991) and it was that same colleague from the India programme team who strongly supported the idea and found the money from that team's budget. It was during Robert's time at Hyderabad that Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) really took off in India (see Chapter 23) and, among other outcomes, became a standard requirement in projects financed by British aid.

The aim of the HFC project was 'to develop a replicable and low-cost farmer participatory approach for agricultural development in rain fed farming areas

of India'. (ODA, 1987, p1) This was a dramatic shift from the 'laboratory to land' approach of agricultural extension in irrigated regions that Britain had been previously financing. The DFID agricultural adviser I was working with was convinced that the new approach was more effective in reducing poverty, but many of his colleagues were highly sceptical, particularly when I sought to introduce a similar shift to agricultural projects in Africa. Invited to make a case for participation to the DFID Natural Resources Advisers' annual conference, I took with me the newly published *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research* (Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp, 1989a) and that evening in the conference bar persuaded 70 happy natural resources advisers to buy a copy.

DFID was a relative latecomer to participation. By the early 1980s it was already a well-established buzzword in Swedish aid, although participation champions were still a 'marginal minority' (Cornwall, 2009, p12). Looking for ways to mainstream participation in the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), those champions at head office, particularly Gunilla Olsson, decided to work with like-minded staff in the World Bank – an increasingly influential actor in the aid system – in the hope that if Sida senior management saw that the World Bank took participation seriously, they would be convinced to follow likewise. Sida funded a four-year participatory learning group at the World Bank (Bhatnagar and Williams, 1992; World Bank, 1996) and Robert threw in his support behind the group's work.

By now 'participation' was benefiting from the sudden collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. This had led to an enthusiasm within official aid agencies for 'civil society' and 'democracy', buzzwords largely absent from aid discourse until then. Increased evidence of the negative impact of structural adjustment programmes also helped poverty reduction creep up aid agencies' agendas, along with increased financing of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – perceived to be better able to work at the community level than official aid agencies. NGOs in turn began to have a stronger policy influence, as typified by the NGO working group set up by the World Bank in the early 1990s.

In 1991, DFID's Asia Programme Director Richard Manning (who subsequently became chair of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD) had already decided that 'community participation' was sufficiently important for it to be the subject of the staff annual retreat, partly in response to strong criticisms from Oxfam of the forestry projects British aid was financing in India. Oxfam – through John Clark, then head of Oxfam's policy advocacy unit and later at the World Bank's NGO Unit – asked for a meeting with the permanent secretary to lobby for an organization-wide policy process on participation, similar to the World Bank's learning group.

This most helpful intervention led to senior management agreeing that social development advisers could establish something similar, albeit more low-key, in the department, kicking off a three-year process of our developing an official line on participation. The policy note that I drafted – that was, with many

amendments, eventually cleared with senior management in 1994 – emphasized that ‘participation contributes to the chances of our aid being effective and sustainable’. It argued that participation is, ‘more effective because, in drawing on a wide range of interested parties, the prospects for appropriate project design and commitment to achieving objectives is likely to be maximized ... It is more sustainable because people are more likely to be committed to carrying on the activity after aid stops, and more able to do so given that participation itself helps develop skills and confidence’ (ODA, 1995a).

My boss strongly advised me that the note had to emphasize that ‘participation’ was just a means to a developmental end. It could not be understood as an end in itself. Thus the language of ‘rights’, including the ‘right to participate’, had to be put on hold until the Labour government was elected in 1997. Nevertheless, I was successful in keeping in the text an understanding of power, conflict and contestation as an aspect of participation.

Notions of community participation and bottom-up development chimed well with the prevailing Thatcherite ideology of rolling back the state. Our policy note also borrowed from the World Bank the concept of the ‘stakeholder’, a private sector term in vogue at the time and one the World Bank opted to use in determining a definition of participation as ‘a process through which stakeholders influence and share development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them’ (World Bank, 1996, p3). In 1994, I attended a meeting of the World Bank’s learning group where this definition was hotly debated, particularly the decision to reject the concept of ‘primary’, as distinct from ‘secondary’, stakeholder because it was not clear as to whether the World Bank’s primary stakeholders were the governments to whom it lent money or the people – those in poverty – that World Bank soft credit was meant to be helping. In London, however, I managed to preserve in our policy note the idea that the participation of primary stakeholders was ‘essential in projects expected to have a direct positive impact on defined groups of people’ (ODA, 1995a). The note stressed several times the inequalities in power relations that could exclude primary stakeholders from participating.

Our note described PRA as ‘the most commonly used method’ for enhancing primary stakeholder participation’ and (shades of my experience in Sudan) that it can often be a ‘more effective research method than the use of large-scale surveys’ (ODA, 1995a). Several DFID advisers had challenged the scientific basis of PRA, but were sufficiently curious to ask me to invite Robert in to run an introductory workshop for staff. He duly arrived in an old pair of trousers, sandals, a sweater tied around his waist and several large rolls of paper under his arm. I tried to keep a cheerful face as I internally agonized over his scruffy appearance and absence of suit and tie. As we went down to the training room, he dropped his papers in the corridor and then scurried after them as they rolled away to arrive at the feet of a bemused deputy permanent secretary, who was accustomed to refer to social development advisers and their ilk as ‘the sandals and beard brigade’. But the training room was packed with enthusiastic staff from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds.

Although DFID had picked up participation later than its Swedish or Swiss counterparts, the growing cadre of in-house social development advisers directly assigned to country programmes, with participation as one of their three responsibilities (along with gender and direct poverty reduction), may have allowed 'participation' to become a more routine practice than in other aid agencies. By the middle of the 1990s, social development advisers were playing a leading role in designing many projects as a process rather than following the conventional blueprint based on the assumption that change can be engineered – if we do 'A', 'B' will always follow. The process project, on the other hand, was designed on the assumption of 'the impossibility of anyone's ever achieving a full grasp of the relevant complexities of society compels action in ignorance' (Lindblom, 1992, p219). The process project was intrinsically participatory; intended beneficiaries, experts, officials and others were encouraged to learn together and to deliberate on what they wanted to do next (ODA, 1995b)

How much was this a pipe dream? By 1994, when it was going through its last round of redrafting, the department's policy note comments that PRA has its drawbacks.

*Communities are not monolithic and people may have very differing views on the issues and problems confronting them. While those carrying out PRA will certainly be aware of the necessity to gain access to the views of less advantaged groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, they may find this very difficult.* (ODA, 1995a).

In writing this, I had been influenced by the views of David Mosse (1994), who was then working as a consultant to a rain-fed farming project in western India. In his subsequent research into this project, he argues that genuine participatory deliberation would have required challenging relations of power and authority, whereas in order for the project to exist it actually re-confirmed existing structures of power, as much within the aid agency, as in the villages where it was working (Mosse, 2005).

In the end, Mosse retreats slightly from this gloomy conclusion to suggest that participatory approaches introduced by the project did, despite everything 'produce new visions, new potential to defend interests or demand accountability and to open up liberating spaces beyond the control of the project' (Mosse, 2005, p239), even if many of these changes were not those specifically anticipated in the project design.

## **PARTICIPATORY POVERTY ASSESSMENTS**

While participatory approaches were becoming mainstreamed in many aid-financed projects, the negative impact on people in poverty of donor-inspired

structural adjustment policies led to a growing interest among social development advisers to have an influence on policy as well as project design. An informal international Social Development Advisers' Network (SDAN) was established in the early 1990s by Swedish, Dutch and British social anthropologists working in their respective aid ministries<sup>3</sup> to encourage development agencies to be aware of and respond to the societal context of their policies and programmes to support participatory development processes. One of our aims was to work with like-minded colleagues within the World Bank to enhance its capacity to integrate an understanding of poverty into its country policy work. In response to the critiques from The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), NGOs and others, in 1991 the World Bank had established operational guidelines for undertaking poverty analysis and the SDAN put pressure on the World Bank to undertake these analyses not only with quantitative but also qualitative and participatory research methods. In 1992, a British social development adviser, Andy Norton, was seconded to the World Bank to help them do this, and he took the lead in developing what came to be known as Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs).

In November of that year Norton – with Paul Francis, a social development consultant to the World Bank – put forward a proposal for doing the first PPA in Ghana (Norton and Francis, 1992). This drew extensively on Robert's approaches to understanding poverty, summarized PRA methods and discussed the challenges of using such methods not at the project level but for shaping national policy. By 1998, 43 out of the 98 poverty assessments carried out by the World Bank included PPAs (Norton et al, 2001). As had happened with the spread of PRA, concerns began to emerge about what was happening to quality as a result of such rapid uptake, and in 2001, Norton and others published *A Rough Guide to Participatory Poverty Assessments: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* to maintain 'the integrity of the process' (Norton et al, 2001). The guide also stresses that PPAs are essentially extractive, largely justified in terms of their ability to influence policy outcomes rather than giving 'poor people the capacity to take control of decision-making processes' (Norton et al, 2001, p17). Robert had already commented:

*PPAs and PRA approaches and methods are not panaceas. They do, though, present new opportunities for policy influence on behalf of those normally excluded. They can bring poor people and policy-makers together in new ways. They can present realities in visual diagrams with a new credibility. To the question 'Whose Voice Counts?' they have shown that the answer can be, more than before, the voices of those previously unheard. (Chambers, 1997a, p1747)*

Donor governments were listening to the argument that the voices of the poor mattered. In Sweden, the government was developing a new global cooperation policy with two cross-cutting principles relating to human rights and 'the perspectives of poor people' (Government of Sweden, 2003, p61). The secretary to the drafting

committee was the same social development adviser, Gunilla Olsson, who had been instrumental in financing the World Bank's participatory learning group. As part of our efforts to influence international development perspectives on poverty, in 1999 it was she and I who recommended that our agencies should finance the World Bank's most ambitious PPA exercise as part of its preparation for the 2000–2001 World Development Report (WDR) on Poverty (World Bank, 2001).

The World Bank's original proposal was to conduct a participatory consultation with 'the poor' in a very large number of countries and to turn the findings into ambitious aggregated sets of numbers. Norton, then in the DFID head office, advised on how to make this something that more genuinely reflected the participatory philosophy of the initial PPAs. But how to ensure that the World Bank would stick to these quality guidelines? The solution was to ask Robert and his colleagues at IDS to act as technical advisers to the process, providing them with a separate contract from DFID to ensure their independence from the World Bank (see Chapter 8). Gunilla Olsson agreed to this strategy and, as DFID and Sida were the only two donors willing to fund, the World Bank reluctantly agreed to reducing the size of the proposal down to 23 countries and to have IDS as an autonomous member of the Voices of the Poor team.

Robert however, was no more enthusiastic than the World Bank about this arrangement and hesitated for some time before agreeing to accept the arrangement, despite Andy Norton's and my efforts to persuade him. His subsequent self-critical reflections about this experience in relation to how power and knowledge distorts and deceives (Chambers, 2002a) are ones that I am still struggling to learn.

I began to appreciate them particularly when working for DFID in Bolivia, using my power as a donor to encourage others to implement participatory methods. Participation could indeed be the 'new tyranny' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), unintentionally contributing to strengthening rather than subverting development agencies' power to set the policy agendas in aid-recipient countries. Robert was, however, well aware of the hidden effects of power that donors exercise through their insistence on participation. This dilemma reveals the kind of paradox that international aid practitioners struggle with on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, the WDR in 2000–2001 reflected donors' wider interest in poverty reduction as the central objective of aid, with PRAs as the principal instrument for achieving this. Such strategies had to be 'owned' by the country, not just by the government concerned and thus, central to the guidance for developing such a strategy was the notion of 'broad-based participation'. An IDS Policy Briefing stressed that 'ensuring a high level of participation in the PRSP [Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper] process is vital' but noted that the challenges in relation to this were very significant (McGee, 2000, p4).

Nevertheless, at the turn of the new millennium, it seemed as if participatory approaches and methods had been accepted by the international aid system as fundamental, not only to appreciating and responding to poor people's realities but also for enabling them to shape governments' and donors' policies.

## A TIRED BUZZWORD?

Ten years later, participation has not gone away. Today a PPA has become a standard tool financed by donors to encourage developing country governments to use it as integral to their poverty reduction/national development strategies. Meanwhile, internal advocates for participatory approaches – social development advisers and others – had switched to the language of rights, itself now becoming very unfashionable, or to citizenship, which still has some impetus behind it.

Participation appears to have become a rather tired buzzword in a world where donors are preoccupied by other issues, such as effective states and security. And donor's and recipient governments' revived enthusiasm for economic growth as the key development objective recently led a senior official from a recipient government ministry of finance, someone who had played a leading role in supporting the introduction of PPAs into her country, to remark that her government has 'done enough of poverty. Now we are into wealth creation.'<sup>4</sup>

Donor enthusiasm for participation started in the days of them funding and being actively involved in local development projects of the kind that the British department for international aid was supporting in the urban slums and rain-fed farming areas of India (described earlier in this chapter). As donors became more interested in influencing the overall policy agenda and devised new aid instruments – such as general budget support – to do so, participation followed suit and, for a brief time, appeared to be making a real difference to how donors went about their task. Whether that is still the case is open to question. The new aid instruments and the exigencies of donor coordination required by the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness have led to donor staff being trapped in the capital city (Chambers, 2006a) and they rarely make field visits to learn about the realities of poverty.

But if people become invisible, you stop worrying about whether or not their voice is heard and their knowledge counts. Thus donor staff have to be persuaded to leave their offices through immersions and other means (Irvine et al, 2006; also Chapter 27) so that participation begins to matter again in Aid land.

## NOTES

- 1 For ease of reference, I shall henceforth refer to the British aid ministry as DFID, although it only assumed that name and full cabinet status in 1997.
- 2 I subsequently discovered that, in its aid to the Caribbean region, DFID had been supporting small-scale community participation initiatives since colonial times. However, it was discovered anew on a much bigger scale in the slum upgrading projects that DFID financed in India from the early 1980s, building on the basic urban services approach of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).
- 3 Gunilla Olsson, Joan Boer and myself over dinner in Gunilla's flat in Stockholm.
- 4 Spoken from the podium of an international donor conference that I attended.

# Power and Participation

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*John Gaventa*<sup>1</sup>

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-8

## EMPOWERED PARTICIPATION

*As a word, power has been almost taboo. Yet, power is everywhere. Considering development without power and relationships is like analysing irrigation without considering water and its distribution.*  
(Chambers, 2005a, p207)

It was about 1996. I had just joined the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to work as a newly recruited Fellow on participatory methods. I had met Robert Chambers many years before, when he was working with the Ford Foundation in Delhi in 1984. I had visited IDS both then and in 1989 as a Visiting Fellow. But the worlds of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) were still a bit new to me. My work on power, participation and participatory methods of research until that time had been mainly in poor parts of the US (Gaventa, 1982), not in the fields of international development, and had drawn mainly from other traditions of participatory action research (Horton et al, 1990), not those about which I was to learn so much in 15 years of working with Robert.

Robert had invited me to join him for a workshop with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) – which had at the time agreed to support the growing work at IDS on participation. We travelled together to an old castle, now a hotel, nestled on the side of a Swiss mountain. That was the first time I saw Robert in action. By the end of the event, the hotel walls were covered with newsprint. Aid bureaucrats, at first a bit stiff, were on their hands and knees, drawing pictures and sorting coloured cards. And, in the grand finale, the Director General, who came to give a speech and to take questions from workshop participants, was persuaded – following Robert's example – to lie on his back on

the floor, dressed in his suit and tie, and to listen to his several dozen assembled staff from this repose, rather than to speak from the podium.

It was an encounter I will never forget, and the story still circulates as legend among some within the SDC. This was not only a participatory event, but also a transformative moment for some of those involved. Over the years in working with Robert, I have seen many similar moments. What I have come to understand and respect is that behind the techniques of brilliant workshop facilitation are deeply held ideas and beliefs about the nature of participation and how power relations have to change in order to enable genuine participation to occur.

Robert's ideas on participation are well known, but with the commitment to participation comes a commitment to empowerment, and to changing power relations for empowered participation to occur. While ideas of power and empowerment have been recurring and enduring in Robert's work, I want to suggest that they have become even more predominant in recent years. Focusing on the ideas of power and participation, I want to highlight six themes that recur throughout Robert's work.

## THE POWER OF METHOD

It is an old adage that 'knowledge is power'. In an era of 'soft power'<sup>2</sup> where discourse, words, framing and image travel so quickly, the power of knowledge is all the more important (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). Robert's work has long recognized this. Not only shall the 'last be first', but they shall do so on their own terms. 'Whose reality counts?' is the critical question for development, and the answer is found in the self-articulated reality of the marginalized and dispossessed, be they the rural poor, farmers, those without sanitation, sex workers, the illiterate or many, many others with whom Robert has chosen to work. In Robert's work, while these multiple forms of knowledge, which reflect the realities of the dispossessed, are critical to expand the perspectives for professionals and policy-makers, even more important is the power of participatory methodologies to generate this knowledge in the first place. Participatory forms of diagramming, mapping, generating numbers, exploring words are valuable not just to inform but to empower. Who creates knowledge – and the process of its creation – is as important as what it is:

*The question to ask, then, and repeatedly, is whose research is it? Conducted by whom? For whom? And if the answer is 'our' research, for 'us' to benefit 'them', it can always be asked – are there ways 'they' could conduct the research or more of it, learn from and own the outcomes, and be empowered to act on them?* (Chambers, 2007a, p32)

Where the answers to the above lead to greater participation in the research process, then:

*[T]he resulting participatory methodologies ... facilitate transformations of power. They enable local people and lowers generally to appraise and analyse the complexity and diversity of their realities. And beyond that they can nurture critical awareness and action to transform power and claim social justice. (Chambers, 2008a, p178)*

## THE POWER OF 'UPPERS'

While participatory methodologies help to empower the 'lowers', critical also is the transformation of the behaviour and attitudes of the 'uppers' – the development professionals, bureaucrats or academics whose knowledge, behaviour and attitudes affect those with less power. 'Uppers' are trapped in their own power and privilege that radically affect how they see the world around them. In his earlier work, Robert used this idea in relationship to how 'uppers' failed to understand rural poverty, due to their innate biases – be they urban, professional, male, seasonal or 'tarmac' based. In later work, the concepts themselves are used to elicit people's own understandings of who the uppers and lowers are in their own lives – and thus become more fluid and eclectic. In 2009, for instance, Robert described a workshop in Egypt where he asked participants to brainstorm 'upper-lower' and 'lower-upper' relationships, and ended up with some 30 or 40 of them (Chambers, 2009c). This in itself is part of Robert's participatory approach to power. While power relations are important – who holds power is not fixed in preset categories, but grows from people's own perceptions. Since power is about perception, power can also be challenged and changed: 'That the relationships are not only very widespread emerges together with the recognition that relationships are often nuanced, full of subtleties and even reversible' (Chambers, 2009c, p1).

Thus, concepts of 'uppers' and 'lowers' in Robert's work are not only descriptive ones but are also fundamental to his theory of change. Change happens partially when lowers articulate their own analysis through participatory methodologies, but it also requires uppers themselves to change through 'reversals' of their own attitudes and behaviour:

*From planning, issuing orders, transferring technology and supervising, they shift from convening, facilitating, searching for what people need and supporting. From being teachers they become facilitators of learning. They seek out the poorer and weaker, bring them together, and enable them to conduct their own appraisal and analysis, and take their own action. The dominant uppers 'hand over the stick', sit down, listen, and themselves learn. (Chambers, 1995b, p34)*

Robert does not just preach this notion – he impressively and constantly tries to model such reversals in his own work, just as when he was trying to get the SDC

Director General to do by lying on the ground to listen to his staff, who at least spatially and temporarily physically became ‘uppers’ over him.

## **THE POWER OF SCALE: MOVING FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE INSTITUTIONAL**

When I first joined the then-emerging participation group at IDS, PRA/PLA were rapidly spreading. New networks of PRA practitioners were developing in dozens of countries; new applications and methods were emerging almost daily; workshops were being held with professionals and practitioners on the Attitude and Behaviour Changes (ABCs) of participation (see Chapter 29). But what was less clear to me and others was how these approaches, that developed largely at the local or project level, could lead to larger-scale changes in policies and institutions. For many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and participation activists, the solution of the day was to mainstream participation and participatory methods into policy processes and into the organizational cultures of places such as national ministries, the World Bank, even the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Among the first IDS workshops I attended were two that focused on how to ‘institutionalize’ participation in development and on how to link participatory research to policy change. As Robert wrote with excitement at the time:

*For us – development professionals in whatever roles, the sort of people who will have a chance to read this book – this is a good time to be alive. Much that we have believed has proved wrong; and a new agenda is fast taking form.* (Chambers, 1998, pxiii)

Within this new agenda, ‘participation has become a central theme in development’ (Chambers, 1998, pxiii). For those of us on the team, they were indeed exciting times. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) were being used to inform poverty policies for the first time, especially in places such as Uganda and South Africa and an Inter-agency Learning Group on Participation was being convened by multilateral and bilateral agencies (see Chapter 7). For Robert, the power of going to scale was critical. While there would be trade-offs over quality and quantity, he reminded us, having some positive effect on millions of people might bring about more positive change than having higher quality participation but with fewer people. For this to happen, we had to engage with mainstream and large-scale institutions.

The opportunity to test this assertion came when IDS, led by Robert, was invited to work with the World Bank to lead the ‘Voices of the Poor’ exercise as background for its World Development Report (WDR) 2000–2001. The result was a massive exercise, involving participatory poverty research in 23 countries, and involving some 20,000 people.

I can remember vividly the meeting of our team's International Advisory Group on whether to engage in this project. For many, there were great risks in doing so. How could the methods be scaled up without becoming extractive or co-opted? For others, who had long argued for the importance of using participation to influence policy-makers and processes, this was an opportunity that could not be ignored. From a basement room of a nearby university, in one of the first video conferences in which we had participated, a group of our southern partners interrogated representatives of the World Bank about what our role in the project would be. After two days of deliberation, we encouraged Robert to take up the invitation and lead the team.

The resulting process and series of studies are now widely documented and I will not dwell upon them here (see, for example, Chambers, 2002a). But at the risk of generalization, I think that this experience of bringing methods to power began a subtle shift in Robert's own writing about power and what was required to change it. I will list these emerging themes below as the power of power, the webs of powerlessness and finally the power to empower.

### THE POWER OF POWER

As discussed above, while Robert had long written about the power of 'uppers', who held biases of professional and privilege, this was and continues to be seen largely in personal terms. In the World Bank project, to be consistent with Robert's philosophy it was absolutely critical not only that the 'the voices of the poor' gave new perspectives to the powerful, but that the powerful reflected on what these perspectives meant for their own behaviour, both individually and collectively. Robert argued strenuously for a Chapter 12 of the WDR that would focus on the power of the powerful themselves and would 'confront the issues of power, and the professional, institutional and personal commitment and change needed for the recommendations of the WDR to bite and make a difference in the real, messy world' (Chambers, 2001, p305). Moreover, such an approach would go beyond only personal change, though that was still critical, to broader institutional change that would involve 'decentering and decontrolling for democratic diversity, transforming top-down hierarchies of domination into cultures of participatory interaction which empower' (Chambers, 2001, p305).

When these arguments were ignored, Robert's views on the 'power of the powerful' began to take a stronger tone, moving from a focus on the personal biases of the 'uppers', which could change through learning and reversals, to a more structural view, in which the personal was deeply linked to the institutional. Writing about the failure of the World Bank to be reflective about its own power, he wrote: 'By calling Christmas vegetarian, the powerful turkeys survive' (Chambers, 2001, p304). And further, 'more generally and seriously, I believe that extreme power is disabling, and that the World Bank and the IMF are victims of their

power' (Chambers, 2001, p305). He suggested then, and continued to argue in later writing that the WDR of 2010 should focus not on the poor:

*But to achieve large-scale good change, the rich and powerful appear a higher priority for study and transformation. And I would argue that the World Development Report 2010 should be not about poverty but about wealth, not about the poor and powerless and their transformation but about the rich and powerful and theirs. (Chambers, 2007a, p13)*

## THE WEBS OF POWERLESSNESS

While the power of the World Bank to extract from, yet not to reflect upon, such a large-scale participatory exercise was perhaps a sobering reminder to the participation enthusiasts, the analysis within *Crying Out for Change: Voices of the Poor*, one of the key volumes which Robert helped to co-author, marked another important shift (Narayan et al, 2000). While in the past, Robert had written a great deal about the multidimensional understanding of poverty, here there is a shift to a more political view. The multidimensionality is not only of poverty but of powerlessness, and the solution not only knowledge but action:

*[T]he dimensions combine to create and sustain powerlessness, a lack of freedom of choice and action. Each dimension can cause or compound the others. Not all apply all the time or in every case, but many apply much of the time. For those caught in multiple deprivations, escape is a struggle. (Narayan et al, 2000, p2)*

Using the visualizations with which he is so brilliant, since the study, Robert has often returned to this web of powerlessness, which links deprivations of livelihood, place, body, gender, social relations, security, behaviour, institutions, organizations and capabilities into a much more holistic and systemic picture than when taken separately or individually. In turn, challenging such interlocking webs of powerlessness means more than particular tools or methods through which the poor express their reality. It is not only about how they become agents of their own knowledge, but agents of their own futures more broadly: 'If development is good change, agency and power are the key to development' (Chambers, 2005a, px).

## THE POWER TO EMPOWER

While development is thus about the agency and power of the powerless themselves, even in his post-'Voices of the Poor' work, Robert remains consistent about the important role of the powerful in enabling the agency of the relatively powerless

to emerge. While in the 1990s, with the focus on methods, Robert's emphasis on 'handing over the stick' became a well-known metaphor for how researchers and facilitators gave up control to listen to and learn from others, in the post-2000 period, this concept is increasingly phrased as the 'power to empower', which enabled others to act for change. Drawing on the commonly used framework of 'power to', 'power over', 'power with' and 'power within', Robert converts the notion of 'power over', which is often presented in a negative way, to a more positive one, which can be used to enable the 'power to' for others: 'More often than commonly recognised, power over can be used to transform power in ways which are not zero sum, with losers, but win-win, in which all gain. For power over also brings power to empower' (Chambers, 2007b, p123). 'By becoming aware of their own power', he writes elsewhere, the powerful can 'open up spaces for those who are poor and excluded to act and claim their rights' (Chambers and Pettit, 2004, p158), for example, to realize their agency. And in giving up their power over, the powerful gain their own freedom as well: 'A paradox of power is the win-win that all can gain when those with power over liberate themselves by empowering others' (Chambers, 2008a, p153).

While the view of power as a win-win game may seem hopelessly optimistic to some realists and students of 'hard power', for those of us who have had the privilege of accompanying Robert on this journey, we have personally seen how strongly he holds to this philosophy not only in theory but also in his everyday practice. Whether in the classroom or in workshops, in the field or in his own team at IDS, he has sought constantly to 'hand over the stick' to others, and to use his own power as a leading development thinker to empower others. Though I am perhaps a bit less optimistic about the chances of persuading the powerful to use their power to empower others, as a (somewhat) junior colleague of Robert's for almost 15 years, I have also experienced how enabling, inspiring and indeed empowering it has been to be a recipient of this philosophy in practice. Maybe what Robert calls the 'power to empower' is best exemplified by his incredible humility, generosity and human spirit – all attributes that most theories (and perhaps most theorists) of power fail to capture.

## NOTES

- 1 Many thanks to Ariel Safdie for her assistance in reviewing some of Robert Chambers' work on power.
- 2 The phrase 'soft power' gained currency with Joseph Nye's well known book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Nye, 2004) and refers to the capacity to obtain results through attraction and persuasion. For further discussion, see Lukes (2007).



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# Reframing Development

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-9

*A statement is true, and a description or representation right, for a world it fits.* (Goodman, 1978, p132)

The philosopher Nelson Goodman's insights into the ways in which words make worlds resonates with the contributions that Robert Chambers has made to development's project of world-making through his creative and prolific contributions to development's lexicon. Goodman puts forward an argument that is deeply dissonant with the epistemological orthodoxy in development studies: that the existence of the world is dependent on conceptions of it. These conceptions are what Goodman calls 'world versions'. It follows, he argues, that when we make world versions, we make worlds. There is no world independent of these world versions, because when anyone is asked to describe the world, they do so using concepts. Our worlds are, thus, dependent on our conceiving of them. We make worlds by taking things apart and putting them back together again, by categorizing, labelling and organizing: 'through dividing wholes into parts, kinds into subspecies, analysing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions' (Goodman, 1978, p7).

Reading Goodman brings into mind an image familiar to many of us who have worked with Robert, of him hunched over uneven piles of brightly coloured cards, which are being sorted and re-sorted to tell stories about the worlds of those who wrote or drew them. There is no room in this image for any judging of whether those stories are correct or false; they are simply versions, each in themselves valuable and valued, right for the worlds they fit. There is much of what delighted Robert about PRA that embodies that process of making worlds that Goodman describes. By creating their own versions, people reclaim the right to name their own worlds as theirs, rather than having other people's world versions forced

upon them in the name of development. And by sifting and sorting, ranking and scoring, using beans and counters, people analyse their worlds using the criteria and distinctions that are meaningful to them and share those world versions with each other.

From his memorable account of that which development practitioners simply fail to see or notice in *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983) to his celebration of alternative constructions of reality to those of the development mainstream in *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997b), Robert's concern has been focused on the negotiation of power in the making of world versions. In doing so, he offers a potent critique of much of what passes for knowledge generation in the service of development. His vision for democratizing that process opens up the possibilities of plural versions co-existing, and of situated understandings that are necessarily as diverse as the positionalities of those who hold them.

As liberating as it is subversive, Robert's perspective on knowledge comes to resonate with an activist project of world-making in which the question *whose knowledge counts?* – a question that he insistently continues to ask in all that he does – comes to embody a fundamental challenge to development business as usual. Through his intense and passionate interest in words and how they are used, Robert's writings have played a significant part in reframing the way in which many of us come to understand a number of words in the development lexicon, including 'development' itself.

In what follows, I look at some of the concepts that Robert has been involved in elucidating and popularizing. I go on from this to take a closer look at the linguistic strategies that Robert identifies in his own writings, and identify a series of tactics that he has used in relation to particular words and phrases in development. I then turn to explore some of the implications of Robert's engagement with word-making and world-making for the ways in which we conceive of development.

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

In the preface to *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, among the disclaimers is the following: 'Nor have I been able to resist, despite good advice, occasionally having fun with language' (1983, px). Language matters intensely to Robert. His ideas are expressed in clear, clean English, never reduced to plodding simplicity, but always immensely readable. He finds the linguistic smokescreen of normal academic writing as irksome as the pretensions of some of those who produce it. His poem 'How to Impress Academic Colleagues' mockingly urges the dull academic to 'Make your prose obscure/Never lucid, never pure' as 'The way to get the upper hand/Is say what none can understand'; he goes on 'You will never get it wrong/If your sentences are long/What you write may make no sense/But lay it on, be doubly dense'. The poem ends with a call to expose the egotism of academic

writing: ‘Let’s challenge these writers to translate/Their texts and subtexts and to state/In simple prose for all to see/Their meaning if meaning there be’ (unpublished poem, no date).

Robert is a writer who works hard at his art; he goes through many versions, amending, reworking, striking out words and searching for replacements that are as redolent or resonant as the work he wants them to do for him. His alliterations are carefully constructed. So too are the allusions that enrich his prose. Combining the shortest of sentences – sentences that have a breathless haste to them, a blast of urgency rather than a sharp staccato – with words that weave colour and meaning into even the tersest phrases, his writing is memorably accessible. It is deliciously different from much else in the development studies field, in which it is uncommon to find much that is so lively and evocative. What makes his work so good to read is not only its clarity, but the mischief that can be found in every one of his books – usually in the footnotes. Perhaps the dry, turgid technicalities of run-of-the-mill development studies writing was a provocation to him to do things differently; as likely an influence, I would imagine, is his abandoned doctoral study of the American popular non-fiction writers whose texts sought to inspire success. What Robert has is not only the capacity to turn a phrase, but also to spot those that have the potential to turn heads and change mindsets.

In his paper, ‘Words, power and the personal in development’ (Chambers, 2005d), written for the International Language and Development Conference in Addis Ababa, Robert is at his most explicit about the relationship between words and power, or, as he puts it, how ‘words are used as part of a power play in development’. He names four such ways:

- To legitimize action: he gives as an example the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, where the words ‘partner’ and ‘partnership’ are used a staggering 96 times.
- To maintain dominance: here he talks of frequent changes in jargon leaving people feeling as if they are behind, and how jargon is used to mask new demands that are being made of aid’s recipients.
- To camouflage and conceal realities: here he gives the World Bank’s account of itself as the example, citing the 2000–2001 World Development Report (WDR) and its copious use of the word ‘donor’ – to the tune of more than 25 times the use of the word ‘loan’ – and the camouflaging of loans through phrases such as ‘donor funds’, ‘aid money’, ‘resource flows’, and so on.
- To sanitize, stereotype or stigmatize: here his example of CNN coverage of the Israeli occupation, with illegal Israeli settlements called ‘Jewish neighbourhoods’.

One well-used rhetorical device in development discourse is to attach adjectives to words, to claim them for particular constituencies and discursive purposes. In a 1997 *World Development* editorial that introduced a phrase that does this – coupling the adjective ‘responsible’ with a term that is only now beginning to find

some traction in development discourse, ‘well-being’ – Robert discusses three ways in which this is done (Chambers, 1997a).

The first is to re-present concepts that have otherwise radical connotations as if they were purely technical: he gives the example of *primary stakeholders*, an apparently technical term that promises ‘putting the last first’. He notes how the World Bank put a freeze on the concept, but how by then ‘it had escaped, and had a life of its own’. Second, he notes, combinations can create disciplinary bridges. He cites Capra, ‘like blinkers, the terms we adopt to express ourselves limit the range of our view’ (Capra, 1996, p268), then, with typical optimism, turns the negative into something out of which positive advantage can be taken, ‘put positively, we can expand and alter our view and what we do by combining terms’ (Chambers, 1997a, p1745). Rather than berating those whose disciplinary blinkers make it difficult for them to appreciate the human dimensions of development, Robert suggests the addition of the word ‘human’ can help by ‘apply to people the familiar language and concepts of numbers and things. So we have learned to speak of human capital, human infrastructure, human resource development’ (Chambers, 1997a, p1745). Third, Robert suggests that combinations of words can stimulate new thinking – starting off without clear definitions, opening a space for exploration and generating meaning subsequently. He gives the example here of ‘sustainable livelihoods’, which began as the title of a conference, caught on and subsequently became an enormously productive term (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998).

Robert’s lists of the ways in which combinations of words work are revealing. The first list speaks to an analysis of the perverse dynamics of power in development that emerges most tangibly in his poetry. It speaks of the strategies of the powerful, the acts of legitimation, mystification, obfuscation and capture that maintain hegemony. This reflects perhaps the brush with the World Bank that Robert experienced during the ‘Voices of the Poor’ exercise, and that Gaventa (Chapter 8) suggests made him much more directly concerned with the perverse and dominating effects of institutionalized power. His second list is quite different. It speaks more to Robert’s own tactical engagement with development language. Indeed, these three tactics represent in many ways what he has called ‘pedagogies for the powerful’ – presenting radical ideas in technical guise so as better to enlist institutions in taking them up, addressing disciplinary myopia through allusion and the gentle suggestion that comes when words refashion the frames of what can be thought, and leveraging terms whose vagueness provides discursive room for new ideas to take shape. These tactics speak volumes about how he has sought to engage the development establishment. Each is one of enlistment, extending agreement, building consensus. None involve critique, confrontation or challenge.

Perhaps the best example of all three tactics being deployed at once is the use that Robert and others have made of the additive qualities of ‘participatory’ when attached to just about anything – participatory development, participatory technology development, participatory evaluation, participatory needs assessment,

participatory planning, and the list goes on. Sometimes, the label ‘participatory’ can work to mark out, dignify, celebrate and incorporate a practice, as a kind of ‘hurrah’ word (White, 1996). At other times the term is no more than a colourful garland; and the critiques aired in *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) took aim precisely at the extent to which this word had come to be abused. What was less evident in this critique was the extent to which the power of attribution – in all its tokenism, for all its performative or therapeutic aspects (Arnstein, 1969) – can open up the possibility for forms of practice that genuinely break the mould. It is these possibilities that Robert celebrates. His use of the term ‘participatory’ becomes something that goes beyond strongly expressed desire for things to *be* participatory: recognizing his own power to pronounce, much as he would disavow it, his labelling things as ‘participatory’ can help to make them so.

### WORDS OF POWER

*The power of vocabulary to change how we think and what we do is easy to underestimate. It influences the course of development in many ways: through changing the agenda; through modifying mindsets; through legitimating new actions; and through stimulating and focusing research and learning.* (Chambers, 1997a, p1744)

Robert recognizes all too well not only the ‘power of vocabulary’, but the power of speech itself. His tactical engagement with ‘participation’ as it emerged as a major development fashion in the 1990s, is revealing of this: both for the words he used, and for the utterances he forewent. Far from being some kind of naïve evangelist as some have represented him as being (Francis, 2001; Henkel and Stirrat, 2001), Robert has always been more than aware of the limitations of much of what was being done in the name of participation. It is in his poetry that we come to appreciate the depth of his anger over the forms of verbal illusion and linguistic kleptomania of one of the most powerful development actors, the World Bank. In ‘Words of Power’ (unpublished, written in the early 2000s) – reproduced in the introduction to this book – he exposes the hypocrisy of the institution that came to describe itself as one that ‘listens’ and to talk the talk of ‘ownership’. There is an ire here that is rarely found in his academic writings: ‘Masters of illusion we/ Rule through our vocabulary ... We have confidence in our trick/*Listening’s* our new rhetoric/On our Empire the sun won’t set/We are the Lords of Poverty yet.’

Robert talks about the ways in which words come to be ‘embedded in the mindsets of development professionals’ and come to be ‘used by them unreflectively’; ‘in this process’, he argues, ‘they change how development realities are constructed and seen’ (Chambers, 1997a, p1745). This, I would contend, was his project with the use of the term ‘participatory’ – not his alone, of course, because he came together with and enlisted many others in this project. It was as if, through

the speech act known as the ‘broken record effect’, what was being said would begin to penetrate, then permeate and finally pervade the minds of development professionals. His arguments about language are arguments about power – the power of framing and the power that is encoded in the boundary concepts from which development gains moral authority. He challenges:

*Whose language brings forth our world and guides our actions? Who defines what words mean? The world brought forth is usually constructed by the powerful in central places or by those well placed to influence them. The words and concepts of development both express and form the mindsets, and values of dominant linguistic groups, disciplines and professions, and organizations.* (Chambers, 1997a, p1746)

## MAKING WORLDS

Robert’s ‘pedagogy for the non-oppressed’ (Chambers, 1997a, p1750) is one in which words make worlds, and in which the world versions that are produced disrupt comforting certainties, reframing development by turning assumptions on their heads and challenging people to look at their worlds from vantage points they have never before considered. In the huge workshops that Robert regularly runs, there is often an exercise on words. One involves people voting on the words that are most commonly used in development, a kind of development bingo. Another calls on people to suggest and vote on the words they would like to see. Over the years, the words that top the lists have shifted, reflecting currents in development discourse. New words have entered the scene. Some appear naked, stripped of the words that link them to development domains – ‘security’, for example, is now just that rather than ‘livelihood security’ or ‘food security’ and with the securitization of aid has gained a whole new set of associations. Others are dressed up with qualifiers, defining a terrain of engagement as well as evoking shifting values in the development industry: ‘rights-based’, ‘community-based’, ‘faith-based’ and ‘results-based’.

‘What are the words we would like to see as part of development?’ Robert asks. And on these lists appear words that feel quite dissonant with what we have come to expect of ‘development’ as we currently know it. Words such as ‘fun’, ‘enjoyment’ and ‘happiness’ are altogether absent in development talk. A former Department for International Development (DFID) bureaucrat once commented that development had been for her so strongly associated with alleviating suffering that it somehow felt wrong to even pronounce the word ‘pleasure’, let alone associate it with development. Love is not anywhere to be seen either, or empathy or compassion or any one of those words that describes feelings that are part of the human condition. If words make worlds – to return to Goodman – Robert’s list of missing words is a reminder that the world versions development creates

are woefully lacking in a positive vision for humanity. Talk of poverty reduction, social protection, security and good governance all reinforce a series of negatives, rather than give us a sense of the possible.

With the all-but disappearance of words such as solidarity and human rights from mainstream development discourse, development is becoming more something that is done to others than something that is about us all. Robert's contribution to reframing development is to turn things around, reverse the gaze, rethink the things we take for granted, reach out and listen to others and tune in better to ourselves. If we can start bringing into development talk words that speak about what it is to be fully human in all its dimensions and, with it, shift development's preoccupations from money and things to people and pleasures, we can perhaps be the change we want to see.



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*Part 2*

# **Rural Development, Poverty and Livelihoods**

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# Exploring Sustainable Livelihoods

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*Gordon Conway*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-10

## INTRODUCTION

I was familiar with Robert Chambers' work and had read his many publications, but it was not until 1988 that we first met in the field and began to work together. We were in Wollo Province, northern Ethiopia, four years after the devastating drought and consequent famine that had received extensive media coverage and led to an impressive response in fund-raising.

At the time, Robert was working at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and I was at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). We had been asked to go to Wollo by the Swedish Red Cross, to work with an Ethiopian Red Cross team led by Costantinos Berhe. Costantinos wanted to help develop the region in a way that might prevent similar devastation, should such a drought occur again. I was accompanied by my colleague Jenny McCracken, and with Robert we took a flight north to Dessie, ahead of the main team who were travelling by road. The three of us drove from the airstrip into the little town past a compound containing large white tents of food aid, each with a giant red cross on the canvas roof. It was disturbingly quiet; there was no traffic, except now and again a huge truck and trailer, carrying grain, careered down the middle of the road, creating a mini dust storm.

Robert and I settled into a small bungalow that had been built for aid workers during the last famine and began to explore ways that we might work together. I remember we first resolved the issue of who took priority over the single electric plug; I needed it for my computer, Robert to make tea. Today I suspect the priorities would be reversed; Robert is fully computer literate and I am a dedicated tea drinker.

## THE MEETING OF METHODS

I brought to this new collaboration the technique of Agroecosystem Analysis, which involves a suite of diagrammatic methods for analysing rural situations, including maps, transects and Venn diagrams (Conway, 1985). Robert's skills were in semi-structured interviewing. He sat with farmers and other rural people and, using sequences of informal questions and answers, elicited information to establish what community priorities were. Robert insisted that this was very different from, and more productive than, formal questionnaires that involved just ticking boxes. We had a good feeling for each other's methods and their comparative strengths and weaknesses and felt we should try to combine them in a practical way. We agreed that the formal planning procedures so dominant at that time ignored many of the problems and opportunities of rural people.

After talking through our techniques with the Red Cross team and accompanying government officials, Robert and I went our separate ways for the first day. I led a small group to discuss with local farmers, in a semi-structured way, the agricultural history of the area. It soon became apparent that the farmers had very precise recollections of the rainfall patterns they had experienced during the previous four and a half years. Their recall was so precise that using memory of field locations and crop cultivation they could bring to mind the number of days it had rained, each month, for the years going back to 1983. Their memory processes were slow and there was much discussion and argument, but the results were simply amazing (Conway, 1988).

Robert led a larger group of the team on an exploration in the nearby hills to discover what was happening there and to apply some of the analytical Agroecosystem graphic techniques. His group spent the day in the hills and arrived back late, just before curfew. They were tired and footsore but very excited; they had found evidence of farmers engaged in innovative crop production, which the team had recorded on simple transect diagrams. Although rainfall in the hills was low, the farmers were conserving water by plugging small gullies with earth and stones. In these gullies they were growing sorghum, coffee, papaya and the mild narcotic plant *chat*. This discovery was significant because the government had recently brought farmers and their families down from the hills to resettle them in newly created and barren villages on lower land. Robert and his team had seen signs of razed dwellings and abandoned home gardens in the hills.

Subsequently, Robert and I attempted to elicit villagers' preferences for crops, in my case for tree species and in Robert's for food crops. I used a technique I christened preference ranking, Robert's technique he called matrix-ranking. These techniques had positive and negative aspects, but the farmers began to engage with the approach, giving us their insights into the relative value of each species of tree and crop that they were asked to evaluate.

These, and similar exercises, helped us, members of the Red Cross team and government officials to gain a better understanding of the complex working lives

of the people. We were particularly impressed by their skills in coping with this challenging landscape, and realized that the answer to their problems was not to impose on them a blueprint for survival, but to develop ways of helping them to build sustainable livelihoods, based on local knowledge, indigenous skills and ingenuity (Ethiopian Red Cross Society, 1988; McCracken, Pretty and Conway, 1988; Scoones and McCracken, 1989).

One day while we were there, Robert asked me, 'Why are we doing this analysis, drawing these diagrams and determining the priorities of these people? Why don't we allow them to analyse and decide for themselves?' It was a potentially revolutionary statement for the ethos of the time. There had been much rhetoric regarding participation, but we realized we now had the techniques that could enable a genuinely productive participatory approach to rural analysis. On leaving Wollo, Robert and I went back to England, but our colleague, Jenny McCracken, travelled to India and experimented with these ideas in the villages where she worked. When she returned with her results, she reported that, in addition to the techniques we had developed, farmers had invented their own techniques. They had improved the analysis and expressed their own priorities (McCracken, 1989). In other parts of the world similar experiments were conducted. Eventually, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was born and spawned diverse approaches, all with the common feature of grassroots, people-based analysis for development (Chambers, 1994b). From these beginnings there developed a global network (see Chapters 22 and 29).

## COMPLEX AND DIVERSE LIVELIHOODS

Three years later in 1991, Robert and I were living in India; he was in Hyderabad, based at the Administrative Staff College of India and interacting with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Topics (ICRISAT), I was the Representative of the Ford Foundation in New Delhi. From time to time I would travel to Hyderabad to stay with Robert and his wife Jenny; Robert would make return visits to New Delhi to stay with my wife Susan and me. He would get up early each morning to traverse a rock face on the Delhi Ridge, getting as far as he could before falling off, a sort of limbering up before his meetings with New Delhi bureaucrats.

In the evenings we discussed our shared experience in Wollo and the PRA exercises in which we had taken part. We agreed that one of the outcomes of our interactions with rural people had been to understand their deeply embedded holistic view of their lives and their environment. This had emerged explicitly in the interviews we had conducted and in the analytical diagrams rural people had produced. We came to use the term 'livelihood' to explain their perceptions and the systems they used for analysis.

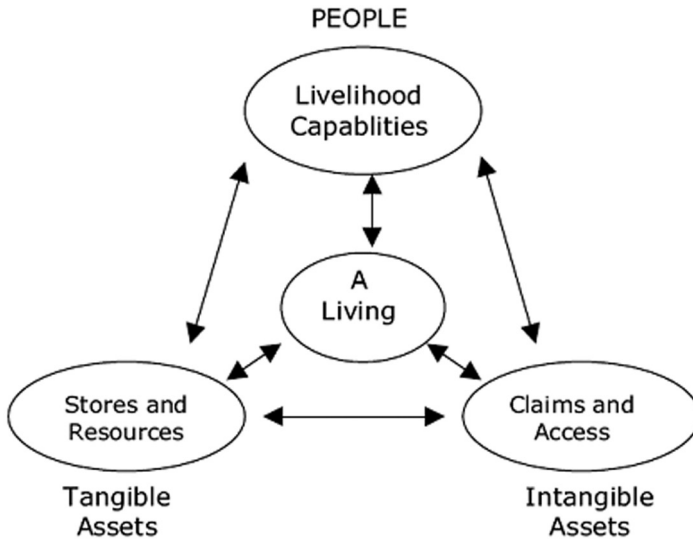
A livelihood can be simply defined as 'a means of a living', but its interpretation is different when comparing between the industrialized world and the villages of

developing countries. In the West, a household livelihood is typically the product of one or two adults working a set number of hours for an employer and receiving a set wage in return. For rural people in developing countries, a livelihood can be constructed from a range of opportunities, some directly producing food and material goods, others related to a regular wage. Farming may be at the core of a livelihood, but non-agricultural activities can play a part, both on and off the farm. Income is earned in a myriad of ways, and sometimes augmented by remittances from town-based members of an extended family. Diversity is a strategy for making a living, enabling people all over the world to cope with challenging and risk-prone environments and social circumstances. Periodic disasters, as occurred in Wollo, happen frequently enough to make resilience a major objective.

The more Robert and I talked about this, the more we realized we had to firm up our ideas. There were some things that needed to be said that might be of value to development workers in government, aid agencies and NGOs. We had some basic concepts to build on, in addition to our field experiences. As Ian Scoones has said more recently, our work is part of 'a rich and important history that goes back another 50 or more years where a cross-disciplinary livelihoods perspective has profoundly influenced rural development thinking and practice' (Scoones, 2009, p173). Robert and I were influenced by this history. It included, 'village studies, household economics and gender analyses, farming systems research, agro-ecosystem analysis, rapid and participatory appraisal, studies of socio-environmental change, political ecology, sustainability science and resilience studies (and many other strands and variants)' (Scoones, 2009, p174). We were also influenced by the work of Amartya Sen on entitlements (Sen, 1981), and Robert and I were particularly persuaded by a paper by Jeremy Swift that discussed the main elements in a livelihood strategy (Swift, 1989). The first published reference to sustainable rural livelihoods, however, was by Robert and M. S. Swaminathan in their contribution to the Brundtland Commission in 1987 (Swaminathan, 1987).

From our respective dwellings in New Delhi and Hyderabad, we decided to take off for a long weekend in the Himalayan foothills at Manali. Robert said he knew of a delightful bungalow-style hotel that we would all enjoy. We set off by car – Robert, Jenny and their son Chris, and Susan and I, all in high spirits. There was one hitch; although we searched the town we could not find the promised bungalow hotel and had to settle for a tall, grubby concrete establishment. At sunrise the next morning we discovered that the building was also occupied by a group of holy men, in orange and white robes, who produced unbelievable amounts of noise from large conch shells that they blew from the roof from 4.30am each day. Our sleep-deprived families went off hiking in the forested hills, while Robert and I settled in the room on the roof that was vacated by the conch players in the daytime. We began to work.

We came up with a definition of a sustainable livelihood. A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with, and recover



**Figure 10.1** *Components and flows of a household livelihood*

Source: Chambers and Conway (1992, p10)

from, stresses and shocks, and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, whilst not undermining the natural resource base (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

We created a diagram of the components and flows in a household's livelihood, influenced by Jeremy Swift's work (Swift, 1989), that took into account individual people, their capabilities and what they do for a living, and put this together with a complex portfolio of assets, some tangible and some intangible.

Part of our reason for writing this paper was to convey a sense of how complex the lives of rural people in developing countries are. We also wanted to explain why understanding this complexity within a conceptual framework is important, particularly if rural development is to do more good than harm. Robert believes passionately that practitioners (whether in the developed or developing countries) have to move away from an industrial country-centric view of development and escape the trap of reductionism. We must move from simplistic *production thinking* to recognizing that hunger is not just about producing food but, crucially, about entitlements. It means moving from *employment thinking*, replacing workplace targets with recognition of the multifarious nature of poor people's livelihoods. It also means changing from *poverty line* thinking, even though, with the focus on wages and salaries it is easier to measure, to an understanding of the ways that poor people take a broader approach to periods of deprivation and times of well-being.

I was motivated by prosaic considerations. Far too often I have witnessed development experts, such as plant breeders with new crop varieties or agronomists with new agroforestry systems, who have been rebuffed by farmers for what appear

to be irrational reasons. A livelihoods approach, which recognizes the complexity of capabilities and assets that come into play when farmers and others make decisions, should ensure that innovations are more appropriate to what farmers need.

This conviction has been strengthened since our 1988 visit to Ethiopia by the findings of PRA practitioners in various parts of the world. It was the reason why, in the first half of the paper, Robert and I described in detail the myriad forms of livelihoods adopted by rural households and the assets, both tangible (and readily discernible to the observer) and intangible (only evident after close questioning and analysis) that livelihoods are built on. To some people this is obvious, and today PRA is accepted and acted upon, but at the time of its invention it was seen as a fresh approach and attracted considerable attention.

## LIVELIHOODS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Robert and I devoted the second half of our paper to the issue of sustainability, both environmental and social, and at local and global levels. We discussed whether livelihood activities destroy or maintain the natural resource base – what today would be referred to as the impact on environmental services. We stressed the role these elements play in desertification, deforestation and soil erosion. We also considered how to improve the productivity of natural resources, for example, by putting organic matter back into the soil. We referred to social sustainability, that is whether a household can gain and maintain an adequate and decent livelihood while coping with stresses and shocks, and whether it can develop the ability to exploit and create changes to ensure the continuity required for inter-generational sustainability.

Although Robert and I mentioned greenhouse gases those passages were written before the full potential impact of global warming was apparent. We pointed out, however, that ‘globally, the least environmentally sustainable livelihoods are those of the rich, mainly in the North’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992, p13). It is a truth reinforced by calculations of carbon dioxide emissions at 10–25 tons per capita in industrialized countries, compared with 1–2 tons per capita or less in sub-Saharan Africa (Conway and Waage, 2010, p246).

We also wrote at length about coping strategies, defining the resilience of livelihoods in terms of their capacity to withstand stresses and shocks of the kind we had witnessed in Ethiopia. Today, the realities of climate change have redefined this capacity as the ability to cope not only with shocks caused by more frequent and more intense climatic extremes, but also the stresses of year-on-year increases in heat, drought and rising sea levels. Research analysing the responses of African village communities to climate change has revealed a clear understanding of the changes occurring in their environments and the existence of a diversity of adaptive livelihoods that they have developed (Toulmin, 1992; Anderson and Monimart, 2008/9; DNIVA, 2010). We ended our paper with three policy implications, the need to:

- enhance poor people's capability to adapt and exploit diverse resources and opportunities;
- improve equity by strengthening the capabilities, assets and access of the poor, including minorities and women; and
- increase social sustainability by minimizing the vulnerability of the poor.

We finished the paper on a Sunday afternoon in Manali and headed down to the plains. Before we left the town, we suddenly came across a romantic looking bungalow nestling in the trees. It was the hotel Robert had described; our families gazed longingly at it through the car windows as we sped by. Not a word was said, but Robert and I subsequently agreed, in our puritanical way, that it was far too pleasant and comfortable a place to do creative work.

The paper was published in 1992 as an IDS discussion paper, rather than in a peer-reviewed journal, but it attracted widespread attention and triggered a productive stream of livelihood writings by development theorists and practitioners. They have been ably reviewed by Ian Scoones (Scoones, 2009). There has also been debate about the immediate and long-term impact of the paper. Ian's conclusion was that although 'the paper was widely read at the time, it did not go much further, and had little immediate purchase on mainstream development thinking' (Scoones, 2009, p175). Neo-liberal debates regarding macro-economic policies dominated the discourse, nevertheless, this changed with the challenges to the Washington Consensus of the 1990s. Most significant, at least for UK theorists and practitioners, was the high-level adoption of a sustainable livelihoods approach within the Department for International Development (DFID) following the victory of New Labour at the polls in 1997, and the appointment of Clare Short as Secretary of State for International Development. One of her first acts was to produce a White Paper (DFID, 1997) that identified 'sustainable livelihoods' as one of three core principles of DFID's development strategy.

In hindsight the transition from a concept elaborated in a discussion paper to a central plank of government policy was remarkable. William Solesbury (Solesbury, 2003) and Ian Scoones (Scoones, 2009) have analysed how it came about, identifying both the logical sequences of events and the elements of pure chance. The adoption of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) by Oxfam, CARE and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1993, 1994 and 1995 respectively and the launch, in 1996, of the DFID/Economic and Social Research programme on sustainable livelihoods were all significant. Yet, perhaps the key to its inclusion in the White Paper was its:

*value as a coherent organising principle for bringing a range of multi-sectoral actions to bear on the primary goal of reducing poverty. It was attractive politically because of its emphasis on the asset base, because of its inherent dynamism and because of its support for self reliance – qualities that resonated with New Labour's philosophy (Solesbury, 2003, p217).*

White Papers are not just rhetoric, they constitute political commitments, and so its publication was soon followed by institutional changes in DFID. Advisory groups were created, followed by a period of intense political infighting to gain control of the agenda and direct staff. Inevitably, given the overwhelming dominance of social scientists and economists in DFID, the Natural Resources Policy and Advisory Department was closed down and replaced by a cadre of 'livelihoods advisers', posted in the UK and in developing country offices. This is not the time to produce a dispassionate review of what has been achieved. There is no doubt that the change has brought more people with professional knowledge of the lives and livelihoods of poor people into DFID. They have influenced thinking and policies, but with the shift of funding towards general budget support away from *on the ground* projects, there has been progressively less opportunity to practice these skills. There has, consequently, been a loss of professionals with technical expertise in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and infrastructure. Inevitably, the original aim of creating a set of concepts within which professionals could operate has been lost.

I have not asked Robert what he thinks about the outcomes of our work together that week in Manali. I think we both believe the conceptualization to be powerful, not just theoretically, but in its potential application to development practice. A sustainable livelihood is clearly what poor households strive to achieve. They do this with varying degrees of success, and under increasing pressures of rising populations, resource depletion and climate change. There are 2 billion poor people in the world and more than 1 billion who are chronically hungry. If policy-makers, donors and development practitioners are to provide help rather than do harm, they need to understand the structure and dynamics of the lives of the poor. That is why the paper is relevant today, as it was nearly 20 years ago.

# Putting the Vulnerable First

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*Stephen Devereux*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-11

My favourite Robert Chambers article is his introduction to an *IDS Bulletin* that he edited in 1989, titled ‘Vulnerability, coping and policy’ (Chambers, 1989).<sup>1</sup> This article was so far ahead of its time that it anticipated the ‘social protection’ agenda by a decade, and many of its insights have not yet permeated development thinking and policy, more than two decades later. In 2006, in a special issue celebrating 40 years of the *IDS Bulletin*, we selected this article as one of the 16 most memorable and influential contributions ever, on the grounds that it ‘is still widely quoted and continues to inform thinking on vulnerability and policy on social protection’ (Devereux and Knowles, 2006, p3).

Robert makes (at least) six key arguments in the first two pages of this article.

## **VULNERABILITY IS NOT POVERTY!**

*‘Vulnerable’ and ‘vulnerability’ ... serve as convenient substitutes for ‘poor’ and ‘poverty’ ... Vulnerability, though, is not the same as poverty. It means not lack or want, but defencelessness, insecurity, and exposure to risk, shocks and stress. (Chambers, 1989, p1)*

Vulnerability and poverty are not synonymous: poverty increases vulnerability because lack of resources intensifies defencelessness against risks and shocks. But not all vulnerable people are poor – even the rich can be exposed to risk, as was shown in the recent financial crisis.

How did Robert reach this simple, but fundamental, distinction? This insight derives from his empathy, which is evident throughout his classic book, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983). Robert describes the world

of ‘We, the outsiders’ as one insulated against deprivation and insured against vulnerability, in contrast to the world of the rural poor, which is characterized by ‘poverty, physical weakness, vulnerability, isolation, and powerlessness’ (Chambers, 1983, p2, p109).

So if vulnerability is not poverty, what is it? As so often with Robert’s writing, he conveys the idea best not by defining it, but by describing it:

The household is vulnerable: *The household has few buffers against contingencies ... Disasters and social demands – crop failure, famine, a hut burning down, an accident, sickness, a funeral, a dowry, brideprice, wedding expenses, costs of litigation or of a fine – have to be met by becoming poorer ... Contingencies often force poverty ratchets, entailing the irreversible loss or sale of assets, making people poorer and more vulnerable to becoming poorer still.* (Chambers, 1983, pp103–104, p110)

Economists define vulnerability more simply – or simplistically – as the risk of future poverty. Poverty ‘signifies *not having enough now*, while vulnerability is about having a high *probability now* of suffering a shortfall *in the future*’ (Christiaensen and Subbarao, 2001, p6; emphases in original). A succinct definition is offered by Dercon (2001, p1): ‘Vulnerability is then defined as *ex ante* poverty.’ This conceptualization might be amenable to the econometric tools of risk analysis, but it reduces vulnerability to the risk of future consumption deficits and runs counter to the spirit of multidimensionality implicit in Robert’s choice of graphic words such as ‘defencelessness’, ‘insecurity’ and ‘stress’. These are not economic outcomes but physical, social and psychological states, and are not conditions that might occur in the future, but compromise well-being all the time.

### **VULNERABILITY HAS TWO DIMENSIONS: ‘EXTERNAL’ AND ‘INTERNAL’**

*Vulnerability has thus two sides: an external side of risks, shocks, and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss.* (Chambers, 1989, p1)

So vulnerability is a composite of exposure to risks and inability to cope, as reflected in the pseudo-equation: ‘vulnerability = exposure + sensitivity’ (or ‘exposure – resilience’). This insight mirrored emerging thinking in the disaster studies literature, which recognized that disaster risk can be mitigated either by managing the natural environment (building flood barriers, resettling people far from hazardous locations) or by strengthening the economic resilience of individuals

and households (enhancing incomes and assets, diversifying livelihoods to spread risk) (Blaikie et al, 1994). Political ecologists now assert that ‘natural disasters’ are in fact ‘social disasters’, that vulnerability is generated and reproduced by processes of inequality and marginalization, and that sustainable ‘disaster risk reduction’ is unachievable unless and until the structural causes of vulnerability are addressed through advocacy and empowerment, rather than by technological fixes and humanitarian relief (Bankoff et al, 2004).

Back in 1989, Robert also identified several types of ‘damaging loss’ that follow from a ‘lack of means to cope’ – ‘becoming or being physically weaker, economically impoverished, socially dependent, humiliated or psychologically harmed’ (Chambers, 1989, p1). In practice, the focus of vulnerability management and disaster response has always been on ‘saving lives and livelihoods’, but the literature on ‘coping strategies’ in the 1980s and 1990s served to underline the importance of social and psychological vulnerabilities and ‘losses’ (Corbett, 1988; Davies, 1996). People facing livelihood stress (for example, farmers during a drought year) adopt a series of ‘coping strategies’ to meet their basic needs until the situation improves (for example, until the next good harvest), but their sequencing of these strategies reflects trade-offs between the economic, physical and social costs of each option. For instance, empirical studies revealed that drought-affected farmers ‘choose’ to go hungry rather than sell key productive assets (they prioritize economic resilience at the cost of physical weakness), while postponing funerals or begging, are last-resort strategies (the social costs are adjudged to be too high) (de Waal, 1989). This behaviour might be difficult for economists to model – since ‘consumption smoothing’ is assumed to be the top priority – but is entirely explicable in terms of Robert’s multidimensional diagramming of poverty and vulnerability. In Figure 6.1 in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Working Paper entitled ‘Poverty research: Methodologies, mindsets and multidimensionality’ (Chambers, 2007a), two of the five dimensions of the ‘web of ill-being’ are ‘insecurity’ and ‘bad social relations’.

## **VULNERABILITY LACKS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

*Unlike poverty, vulnerability lacks a developed theory and accepted indicators and methods of measurement.* (Chambers, 1989, p2)

This observation anticipated numerous attempts during the 1990s to conceptualize and measure vulnerability. Caroline Moser’s ‘asset vulnerability framework’ built on Robert’s observation that ‘vulnerability, more than poverty, is linked with net assets’ (Chambers, 1989, p1). Moser identified five categories of assets – labour, human capital, productive assets, household relations, and social capital – and argued: ‘The more assets people have, the less vulnerable they are, and the greater

the erosion of people's assets, the greater their insecurity' (Moser, 1998, p3). Despite incorporating 'social assets' as well as 'economic assets', this formulation allowed economists to reduce vulnerability to income plus physical assets, and several agencies subsequently devised operational indicator-based tools for measuring and monitoring this notion of vulnerability. These included ActionAid's 'Participatory Vulnerability Analysis' (PVA); CARE's 'Program Guidelines for Conditions of Chronic Vulnerability'; the Ethiopia Early Warning Working Group's 'Chronic Vulnerability Index' (CVI); FAO's 'Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping System' (FIVIMS); USAID's 'Current Vulnerability Assessment' (FEWS NET); and the World Food Programme's (WFP) 'Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping' (VAM).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the VAM methodology incorporated 'external' as well as 'internal' indicators of risk – echoing Robert's 'two sides' of vulnerability. In Malawi, the (affectionately nicknamed) 'VAMpires' divided rural areas into four livelihood 'clusters', each subject to distinct sources of risk (Morinière et al, 1996). 'Generic risk factors' included frequency of drought, availability of off-farm incomes and levels of market integration. 'Household-specific risk factors' included limited land-holding, illiteracy and high dependency ratios. These risk factors were correlated against three outcome indicators – poverty, food deficiency and malnutrition – to derive an index of 'composite vulnerability' for each livelihood cluster and sub-district. Rather crudely, sub-districts were ranked by this index for geographic targeting of WFP food aid – so everyone in highly vulnerable communities received food aid, but highly vulnerable families living in less vulnerable communities were excluded.

Ultimately, many of these attempts to monitor vulnerability ran into a conceptual cul-de-sac, because they defined vulnerability in terms of outcomes ('vulnerable to hunger'), rather than causes ('vulnerable to drought'), or identified 'vulnerable groups' by generic characteristics (female-headed households, orphans, people with disabilities), rather than their susceptibility to specific risks or hazards. This confusion persists in programming for vulnerability – for instance, many drought relief programmes target labour-constrained 'vulnerable groups' (for example, pregnant and lactating women), rather than 'drought-affected farmers'.

## VULNERABILITY IS NEGLECTED BY POLICY-MAKERS

*Vulnerability has remained curiously neglected in analysis and policy, perhaps because of its confusion with poverty. Yet vulnerability, and its opposite, security, stand out as recurrent concerns of poor people which professional definitions of poverty overlook.* (Chambers, 1989, p1)

Robert explains the failure of development thinking to incorporate complex notions such as vulnerability in terms of professional biases – specifically those of economists. Vulnerability is too diverse, too intangible and too messy for

quantitative economists, who dominate policy formulation, but prefer to measure development in terms of things they can count, such as cash, calories or cows. Importantly, Robert's objection to economists is not populist or rhetorical, it is grounded in several decades of astute observation of development policy processes.

*In assessing conditions, and seeing what to do, professionals' realities are universal, reductionist, standardized and stable. Those of economists dominate, expressed in poverty thinking concerned with income-poverty ... Patterns of dominance are then reinforced: of the material over the experiential; of the physical over the social; of the measured and measurable over the unmeasured and unmeasurable; of economic over social values; of economists over disciplines concerned with people as people. (Chambers, 1995a, p173, p180)*

The consequence of these professional biases is that development policy is preoccupied with poverty indicators and quantifiable targets – Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – to the neglect of policies to increase livelihood security and reduce economic and social vulnerabilities. The assumption that one will lead inexorably to the other is demonstrably untrue. 'For hundreds of millions, vulnerability has increased and so their livelihoods have become less securely sustainable even when their incomes have risen' (Chambers, 1995a, p189).

### **REDUCING VULNERABILITY REQUIRES DIFFERENT INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCING POVERTY**

*Programmes and policies to reduce vulnerability – to make more secure – are not, one for one, the same as programmes and policies to reduce poverty – to raise incomes. (Chambers, 1989, p1)*

Social protection was devised by development donors in the late 1990s, precisely to address the vulnerability and insecurity that conventional anti-poverty policies overlook (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007). Unfortunately, the social protection discourse was immediately appropriated by economists, who reduced it to mechanisms to address insurance market failures. 'Social risk management', the World Bank's social protection framework (Holzmann and Kozel, 2007), is actually about managing economic risks; it makes no attempt to address social risks and vulnerabilities, such as gender bias or discrimination against minorities.

Before the emergence of the social protection policy agenda, efforts to address vulnerability were dominated by 'social safety nets'. Although they subsequently acquired a bad name, Robert correctly identified the significance of effective safety nets in the mid-1990s:

*Safety nets, the third, sometimes lame, policy leg of the World Development Report (1990) are vital ... as a livelihood-sustaining safety net to help poor people avoid becoming poorer. For sustainable livelihoods, the vulnerable poor need safety nets.* (Chambers, 1995a, p200)

Social protection, a more sophisticated elaboration of safety nets, should have provided the antidote to vulnerability – a policy toolkit to build resilient livelihoods, protect people against impoverishing shocks and stresses, and eradicate the social origins of vulnerability (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2008). People are vulnerable, as Robert observed, because they are marginalized, voiceless, discriminated against and exploited, not only because they lack incomes and assets.

Instead, the case for social protection is often made in terms of its impact on poverty reduction, not vulnerability reduction. Economists argue that vulnerable people should ‘graduate’ from social protection programmes such as the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia, where graduation thresholds are defined in terms of household asset values – in effect, crossing an asset poverty line (Carter and Barrett, 2006). Yet, following a failure of the rains in 2008 most PSNP ‘graduates’ were impoverished and left worse off than before (Devereux et al, 2008). Robert, who understands that rural vulnerability is cyclical and seasonal, rather than linear, could have predicted this. ‘Vulnerability is heightened during wet seasons when food shortages, sickness and agricultural work coincide, and is acute when rains and agricultural seasons fail’ (Chambers, 1983, p110). More specifically, the PSNP was complemented by ‘Livelihood Packages’, given on credit, that aimed to diversify household sources of income, but Robert warned against such packages more than 20 years ago:

*For poor people, there are trade-offs between vulnerability and poverty, or, to put it positively, between security and income. Some programmes ... seek to raise incomes but at the same time entail a loan and indebtedness. But poor people all over the world are reluctant to take debts which increase their vulnerability. One implication is, therefore, that government programmes which, whatever their benefits, make poor people indebted or in other ways more vulnerable, should be treated with caution ... Reducing vulnerability can be as important an objective as reducing poverty.* (Chambers, 1989, p5)

## VULNERABILITY IS POLITICAL

*Claims can be on other individuals or on households, patrons, the government, or the international community.* (Chambers, 1989, p2)

Vulnerability is scary because the remedies are often political rather than economic. Robert recognized this in an analysis of resistance to exploitation in India: ‘without an organised power base, and without outsiders’ support, the rural poor remain vulnerable’ (Chambers, 1983, p166). In India and elsewhere, many causes of vulnerability are structural and demand interventions – such as unionization and pro-poor legislation – that challenge power relations at the national level. This inevitably shifts the analysis of and responses to vulnerability into the political sphere (Hickey, 2008). Addressing structural vulnerabilities requires acknowledging that citizens have ‘claims’ or entitlements that office-bearers have obligations to meet. If those claims are not met, then civil society mobilization might be necessary – not a recommendation that is likely to be seen in a World Bank poverty report! As Robert observed: ‘powerlessness is crucial but it is rare for direct action against it to be politically acceptable’ (Chambers, 1989, p1).

India is also one country where livelihood vulnerability has been effectively countered through campaigns for human rights. In his 1989 *IDS Bulletin* ‘Editorial introduction’, Robert praised the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme as ‘a model of how ... poor people can be empowered to demand and receive work and remuneration when they need it ... putting a floor under the poor to enable them to survive a bad time without having to become poorer’ (Chambers, 1989, p5). In 2001, following a drought in Rajasthan that resulted in starvation deaths, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed public interest litigation with India’s Supreme Court, arguing that the government has a constitutional obligation to protect the right to life. After years of activism by the Right to Food Campaign, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was passed in 2005, guaranteeing every rural household the right to 100 days of employment each year, at the minimum wage, from their local administration. This is one of the world’s first ‘on demand’ safety nets, and its potency derives from being underpinned by rights-based legislation (Bhargava, 2006). Not surprisingly, Robert is an enthusiastic supporter:

*To end seasonal hunger, rights and power are crucial. This is shown by India’s employment guarantee schemes. Poor people must have rights to make demands. There must be an enforceable right to food.* (Chambers, 2008b, pxviii)

## CONCLUSION

One of my first encounters with Robert was in a participation workshop at IDS. Robert stood in front of us, holding a map of the world. ‘Your map’s upside-down’, someone pointed out. ‘Is it?’ Robert asked innocently, looking down. ‘Not from where I’m standing it isn’t!’ From where I am standing, Robert’s power to persuade has always derived from his ability to see the world from ‘other’ perspectives, as reflected in his insistence on ‘reversals’, on the imperative for development

professionals to immerse themselves in the realities of poor people's experiences, rather than importing assumptions and models from their own upbringings and countries, and on 'putting the last first' – or, in this instance, 'putting the vulnerable first'. If the 'normal professionalism' that pervades development studies and policy-making has resisted the radical idea that 'The poor, weak, vulnerable and exploited should come first' (Chambers, 1997b, p11), it is not for Robert's lack of trying to convince us.

I conclude with a personal reflection. Robert has been an immense presence in my work since I joined IDS in 1996. At a professional level, I have been profoundly influenced by his thinking on seasonality, rural poverty and vulnerability, and I was privileged to work with him recently on an initiative to revive academic and policy interest in seasonality (see Chapter 12; Chambers, 2008b; Devereux et al, forthcoming, 2011). Robert is also a lot of fun to be around – like the 'lcddu' livelihoods he describes, he is 'local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable' (except for local – Robert is decidedly global). But it is as a 'moral colleague' that I value Robert most. If all development professionals were as principled and passionate in the conduct of their work, there would be a lot less ill-being – including vulnerability – in our world.

## NOTES

- 1 This is not my favourite of Robert's titles, though, which is (if I recall correctly) 'Trying to see what to do', a report on an Oxfam workshop about agricultural policy in Burkina Faso in the 1970s.
- 2 See agency websites for details of each methodology.

# Seasonality: Uncovering the Obvious and Implementing the Complex

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-12

## INTRODUCTION

Seasonality was tailor-made for Robert Chambers' talents, and in particular his extraordinary inventive thinking and boundless energy and enthusiasm for cross-disciplinary analysis. Seasonality – seemingly a general, abstract and commonplace issue – has multiple effects on poor rural people. Seasonality should not be carved up by professionals looking only at their specialism, whether that is food production, health, nutrition, prices and wages or social relations. Seasonality has multiple, interacting effects, and rural people face them all. Although the impact of seasonality is very obvious to the rural poor, the same cannot be said for those living and working mostly in urban areas who design policies, programmes and projects and carry out research on how to improve the rural poor's livelihoods and welfare.

However, despite such prevalent 'seasonal blindness' among development professionals, seasonality has long been in the frame of one group – field research nutritionists. They have measured seasonal fluctuations in food consumption and child malnutrition rates (Schofield, 1974), allied to the well-known 'hungry season' in countries, especially those with a uni-modal distribution of rainfall. I loosely attach myself to this group, being an agricultural economist who has researched the interactions between farm work, crop production and nutrition (Longhurst and Payne, 1979, Longhurst, 1984).

This chapter discusses my interactions with Robert's work on seasonality over the past 30 years, and the important paradigm shift that serious consideration of seasonal dynamics implies for rural livelihoods and development.

### LIGHT BULB MOMENTS

In March 1977, I returned from my doctoral fieldwork in northern Nigeria after research on household farm work, food and nutrition.<sup>1</sup> I had interviewed a sample of about 60 farmers and households at least six times during the year and, as a result, the impact of different times of the year on rural livelihoods was much on my mind. I had lived in the village of Dayi, 50 miles west of Kano, and seen how the farm households managed their portfolio of income-earning activities according to the opportunities that arose and within the constraints and obligations that bound them. The arrival and subsequent timing of the rains was a major factor in both work and incomes.

During this research I needed to somehow estimate the dates of birth of the 120 children in my sample who were under five (in order to anchor anthropometric measurements). Believing that the month of birth was not remembered or even registered, I recorded the season of birth, using the beginning, middle and end of dry and wet seasons in this area of uni-modal rainfall (from May to September). A pattern did emerge, with a peak in births during the late wet season.

At the same time as I was chewing over my findings, Peri Halpern, at a seminar at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), independently reported the same phenomenon for Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> This light bulb moment became a tipping point in terms of our emerging ideas about seasonality – this facet could be added to the already known seasonal fluctuations in physical factors of agricultural production, food consumption, nutritional status and prevalence of some, not all, diseases such as malaria.

The gleam in Robert's eye was now burning bright. Do these factors all come together to accentuate rural poverty? This was only the beginning. What about wages of rural employment and prices of food? How did disease patterns interact with peaks of energy expenditure? What about the seasonal time-allocation of different family members, especially women, for different tasks, and how did this line up with reproductive health issues? Did the terms of trade move against the poor in this way at the time of the 'hungry season'?<sup>3</sup> Did non-farm rural work provide compensation for farm income earning under seasonal stress? In addition to taking on board agriculture, epidemiology, demography and economics, there were also social and gender relations to consider. How are power relations altered, enforced and entrenched with the impact of seasons?

With all of these many co-linear variables, Robert came up with a set of interlocking hypotheses that could be tested across uni-modal and bi-modal (even tri-modal) seasonal situations, and so we decided to bring together health

professionals, economists and sociologists, many of whom had carried out research in the same countries. Almost every day Robert would come into the IDS with some new fact (for example, about the seasonal patterns of dengue fever), obscure historical perspective, particular biblical saying, postcards of van Gogh paintings or poem couplet in the making. These were all the rich side dishes to the emerging main course of paradigm-generation.

## SEASONALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

This led to a major conference on seasonality held in July 1978, co-organized with the Ross Institute of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) (Chambers et al, 1979, 1981). This conference had set out to be a one-day workshop, but grew and grew as seasonal case studies were uncovered and rediscovered. Robert extracted unbudgeted funds for these extensions from the long-suffering administration at the IDS. This conference provided literature reviews to test the extent of how seasonal variables did interlock, when and to what effect (among others, Dyson and Crook, 1981, on seasonality of births and deaths).

The richest material came from case studies with varying degrees of inter-disciplinarity from Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Tanzania. The overall conclusion was that seasonality was definitely something to be taken into account when considering how to improve the lives of the rural poor. Robert eloquently summed this up:

*Seasonal stress drives (the rural poor) into debt and dependence. The knowledge that there will be future seasonal crises constrains them to keep on good terms with their patrons. They are thus screwed down seasonally into subordinate and dependent relationships in which they are open to exploitation ... stress is passed down to the weakest – women, children, old people and the indigent. Sometimes the screw becomes a ratchet, an irreversible downward movement into deeper poverty as assets are mortgaged or sold without hope of recovery. This is, then, a time when poor people are kept poor and a time when they become poorer.* (Chambers et al, 1981, p5)

The book argued that those involved in formulating policy for the rural poor, whether concerned with seasonality or not should always keep the 'screw' and the 'ratchet' in their minds. These are graphic and effective ways of describing the dynamics of rural poverty; focusing on the power relations and resource flows between groups. They are also analytical tools to assess the background as to what sort of support and interventions are needed.

The post-conference period saw two actions driven by Robert to move forward the seasonality agenda. At the time, these were highly innovative. The first was to

ensure that the findings of the conference were disseminated to policy-makers. So a discussion paper showing the results of the conference was rapidly produced – first in English and then translated into French and Spanish – and sent around to more than 150 countries, one each to the Ministries of Finance and Economics, Planning and Agriculture and Health (Chambers et al, 1979). Although this broke precedent for IDS publications, which were usually made available only to those who asked for or purchased them. At that time there was nothing put into research budgets for ‘communications’, let alone ‘communication officers’. Unfortunately we know that the impact of this dissemination was minimal; there were only a handful of responses, mostly acknowledgements from junior officers, and we have since learned from research-into-use programmes that sending a university paper in such an untargeted way was expecting a lot in terms of policy change. However, 30 years ago this was a radical move and perhaps paved the way for a change in attitude among some IDS researchers.

The second element was Robert’s notion of ‘seasonal blindness’. This became a central part of his campaign to show how ‘we’ fail to understand so much about ‘them’ (the rural poor), through so many interlocking biases. This was first proposed as the ‘tarmac’ bias (Chambers, 1981a) in the sense that visitors to rural areas – or ‘rural development tourists’ as Robert memorably termed them (Chambers, 1983) – rarely got a balanced view of rural life in so far as they kept to tarmac rather than dirt roads; met with roadside households that were likely to be better off than those away from the road; met with men rather than women, the well rather than the unwell, the articulate rather than the cowed; and were more likely to travel in the dry season rather than the wet season and so saw a more relaxed view of rural communities as they coped. This was another of Robert’s interlocking sets of variables that conspire to give us a less than comprehensive picture of rural poverty.

We revisited seasonality at a small workshop in the mid-1980s, with a more specific focus on rural poverty. This led to the publication of an *IDS Bulletin* (Longhurst, 1986). Here we tried to fill gaps with a more analytical treatment of seasonality and poverty by Michael Lipton (1986), and a more detailed treatment of gender by Janice Jiggins (1986). Robert also introduced an analysis of the role of trees and natural resources (Chambers and Longhurst, 1986; Chapter 18). In the book of 1981, the word ‘trees’ did not appear in the index, yet their products were integral to many seasonal strategies – something to which we were blind in the earlier work. The case-study material was also extended with three west African Savannah/Sahelian pieces from Mali, Niger and Ghana, to give a greater emphasis to pastoralism, with pastoralists facing a different set of seasonal stress compared to settled farmers (Longhurst, 1986).

Today seasonality is back on the agenda, framed by concerns with climate change, social protection and vulnerable livelihoods. In 2009, more than 30 years on, a conference revisited the debates of 1978 (Devereux et al, 2011).<sup>4</sup> Robert looked back and identified some further gaps that we had not considered before – including shelter, the coincidence of sickness and inability to absorb food, the

multiple effects of poor sanitation and old people (Chambers, in Devereux et al, 2011). And of course, in the past 30 years there has been a revolution in methods – now labelled Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) – which enable people to do their own research (see Chapter 22).

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Despite all these efforts, the uptake of seasonality into rural policy, especially the appreciation of the vital interactions between agriculture, health and power relations, has been disappointing when viewed in the light of our high – perhaps too high – expectations and excitement over the years.

Our enthusiasm to uncover the complexity of seasonality and rural life has run up against the sectoral limitations (and related incentive structures) of government ministries and projects. Although seasonality is most marked in areas with a bi-modal pattern of rainfall, the critique has application where ever there are fluctuations in production and consumption. There are no incentives for someone in a Ministry of Agriculture (anywhere) to say, ‘our new seeds policy must take note of the human health issues with respect to when the crop matures, let’s work with our colleagues in other ministries about this’.

On reflection, our efforts should have concentrated more on how seasonality can be mainstreamed across the board into economic policies. We missed getting under the skin of policy-makers and trying to inch them towards understanding of seasonality in policy design. After addressing the complexity that seasonality generates in a mass of context specific detail, then we need to debate what we should do with it, and how we can turn it into workable programmes and policies. This question concerns all research workers, whose professional incentives are to uncover complexity and to contrast this with the status quo. However, there is growing experience, variously called ‘research into use’, ‘research and policy in development’ or ‘the influencing agenda’ that is giving some steer in this area (see the work of the Research and Policy in Development Group at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London, starting with Hovland, 2003).

Ensuring that research makes a difference was something that Robert and I often discussed in the time we worked together on seasonality. Conversations often centred on the importance of knowing where to ‘position’ yourself on the ‘swing-o-meter’ of generating action to address rural poverty. At one end of the scale there are those who generate ideas, reveal complexity and show why standard actions are not working to the full. In the middle of the scale are those who recognize change is needed, but do not believe that the full complexity of the situation can be implemented and want to know what level of reductionism is acceptable for effective action. At the far end of the scale are the more conservative elements that resist change. What matters is that over time you are supporting the process so that changes are being achieved. Robert positions himself at the ideas end, taking

the lead from the situation that poor rural people face. When the time comes to turn this rich detail of the complexity of rural life into some sort of scaled-up programmes, Robert has often moved onto another subject or area. I suspect this is because he believes his strengths are in upturning stones and helping rural people as they try to do their own research about their daily lives – and often throwing those stones at those unwilling to take action. He also does not want to see the richness, ingenuity and vitality of rural life reduced too much in any way. Marching behind Robert should come many others making sure that ideas are turned into action. Over the years, Robert has touched thousands of people and many are doing just that right now.

More than 30 years on I am still in deep discussion with Robert; we are still debating complexity and reductionism, arguing on the IDS stairwell as people pass between us, no doubt wondering why these two people cannot find somewhere better to argue – Robert is usually rushing somewhere and the stairs is the place where he slows down marginally. To this day, he continues to move the centre of intellectual gravity towards a better understanding of rural people showing us what we need to address, not what the many other actors propose, whether donors, NGOs, governments or other opinion formers. Most often a reductionist view prevails that does not take in enough of the perspectives of rural people. As interventions and policies, projects and programmes try to improve the welfare of real people living in poverty, elements of reductionism inevitably creep in, but Robert's work and enthusiasm encourages us to both beware of it and challenge it.

## NOTES

- 1 Carried out under the umbrella of the pioneering Rural Economy Research Unit of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology of the Institute of Agricultural Research, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
- 2 The subsequent pursuit of a 'conception trap', which is that the poor were forced to conceive so that the final trimester of pregnancy and the birth of the child was at the most harmful time of year, did not prove fruitful, because there are so many times when the life of a baby and young child is under threat, such as when passive immunity is lost, breast-feeding stopped and so on.
- 3 Michael Watts (1983) has pointed out that although Western professionals, may only have one word for the 'hungry season', those who experience it (in northern Nigeria) have more than 50 definitions for it.
- 4 Seasonality Revisited International Conference, 8–10 July 2009, Institute of Development Studies, UK, [http://event.future-agricultures.org/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://event.future-agricultures.org/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1), accessed 19 August 2010

# Refugee Studies

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*Barbara Harrell-Bond*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-13

## THE HIDDEN LOSERS

Robert Chambers played a significant role in the development of the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC, then the Refugee Studies Programme or RSP).<sup>1</sup> I did not know *how* significant until one day, in 2004, I was walking with John Gerhardt and Belinda Allan through the streets of Old Cairo. John Gerhardt at that time was the President of the American University in Cairo, but had formerly been the representative of the Ford Foundation in Cairo. We were reminiscing about the cold November day in mid-1980, when John had first visited Belinda and me in Oxford to discuss Ford's possible interest in supporting the RSP. He told us that before he had made this visit, Robert had pointed his finger and instructed him in no uncertain terms, 'Now John, you *fund* that woman!'

My first encounters with Robert were around 1983, by handwritten letters on blue airmail paper between Oxford and Hyderabad. I had read his books and became interested in his work on refugees through my reading his 1979 article, 'Rural refugees in Africa: What the eye does not see' (Chambers, 1979b). It argued the case for the disadvantaged position of refugees who had settled among their hosts rather than moving to camps where ostensibly they would benefit from the beneficence of the Office of the UN High Commissioner (UNHCR). This view of UNHCR's humanitarianism and the work of non-governmental agencies (NGOs) had informed my initially quite naïve proposal to conduct research among refugees in camps in an emergency situation; the emergency that I found was that of thousands of Ugandans entering Southern Sudan in 1982.

I have to thank Sjoerd van Schooneveld, then the UNHCR's programme officer in Yei River District, Southern Sudan, for pushing me to compare the situation of refugees in camps with the condition of the many more UNHCR-

designated 'self-settled' refugees (Harrell-Bond, 1986). To my surprise, I found that those refugees who were living among their hosts had more secure access to land to farm and enjoyed better diets (that included meat and fruits), than refugees living in camps did. They had suffered higher mortality rates on this arrival in Sudan (understandable because there were so few medical facilities in the emergency), but on the whole steadfastly preferred their situation to life in a camp. It was only when drought and famine hit the border that a large number succumbed to UNHCR's invitation to move to camps, but this was because there was food distributed in the camps and not in the border areas. Ironically, when food rations were reduced in camps, refugees living on the borders among their hosts were sending food packages to the camps.<sup>2</sup>

While I was writing *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Harrell-Bond, 1986), Robert and I continued our exchanges regarding the issue of advantages of camps versus refugees settling among their hosts. Apparently the evidence won the argument, and his next publication on the refugee situation was his 1984 paper, 'Hidden losers? The impact of rural refugees and refugee programmes on the poorer of their hosts' (Chambers, 1986c). This produced more discussion between Robert and I – primarily regarding how assisting refugees and excluding their hosts exacerbated the security problems for the refugees, as hosts compete with them for resources. Robert's paper did have some positive effects on UNHCR policy. Although camps are usually positioned in places where there are very few locals, the parallel health and other facilities that UNHCR establishes in them have become available to the surrounding national population.

## THE EMERGENCE OF REFUGEE STUDIES

Robert returned from India to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex and soon visited the RSP. The place was then buzzing with students from within the University, as well as Visiting Fellows from various parts of the world. One of these was Ahmed Karadawi from Sudan (Karadawi, 1999). They discovered the Betts papers that were lodged at IDS's library. They contained records of Jimmy Betts' last 20 years (working for Oxfam) researching refugees in East Africa (see Hawley, 1984).<sup>3</sup> I asked Robert if the RSP could borrow this collection as there were so many people in Oxford who needed them. This rather unusual request was granted before we even realized the extent of the collection – it took an entire shelf across one side of the library! Recognizing how much use they would have in Oxford, later on, Jimmy's wife, Jean, together with the cooperation of IDS, bequeathed the papers to the RSP.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of such 'grey' literature to the field of refugee studies cannot be underestimated.<sup>5</sup> Most research on refugees is still done by consultants working for NGOs, international and inter-governmental agencies and is not published but ends up on the shelves of the commissioning agency, and this was especially

the case at the time.<sup>6</sup> The articles and books that fitted the genre ‘refugee studies’, were scattered in libraries and published in different disciplinary journals across the world. In the 1980s, even had we had a library budget, it would have been difficult to spend it on buying new books. Today the RSC library holds some 40,000 titles.

At the time, there were very few academics who had done pioneering work in refugee studies, but there were some. Peter Loizos (1981) had returned to the Cypriot village where he had previously conducted his doctoral research when its population became refugees. Art Hansen (Hansen and Oliver-Smith, 1982), Rene Hirschon (Hirschon and Thakurdesai, 1979), and Anita Spring (1979) had all ‘found’ refugees in the areas they were studying and to their credit saw the significance of writing about them. The *Disasters* journal was launched in 1977 with John Seaman, a medical doctor, as its first editor, and it remains today a highly significant publication in the field. While Guy Goodwin-Gill published the first edition of *The Refugee in International Law* in 1983 (Goodwin-Gill, 1983), Loescher and Scanlan’s *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America’s Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* and my *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* did not appear until 1986.

## SILENCED VOICES

In March 1984, the RSP hosted a conference entitled: ‘Assistance to refugees: Alternative viewpoints’.<sup>7</sup> To the end of encouraging refugee participation, and with the Ford Foundation’s help, we were able to bring 18 refugees – self-settled, camp and urban refugees – from several parts of Africa (Wallace, 1984).<sup>8</sup> Governments, refugee-assisting NGOs and UNHCR representatives attended and it was covered by the press. It was a conference that, at the least, could be described as ‘dynamic’ because, for the first time, refugees had a ‘voice’ and used it to the consternation of many of the ‘professional’ humanitarians present (and those who did not attend but read the press coverage). The ‘house’ as UNHCR is usually referred to, never forgave me, I am afraid, for Stephen Pile’s parody of them:

*Most of their [the refugees’] anger was aimed at three elegant, sophisticated, smart-suited, often cigar-smoking representatives of the United National Commission for Refugees. In the eyes of displaced persons, these international civil servants are slow-moving bureaucrats who make comfortable careers out of the refugees’ plight. It did not help that the defensive trio stayed and dined not at the college like everyone else but at a four-star hotel. They huddled together at meetings and were shot down in flames every time they spoke. Rarely have saviours and the saved had so little time for each other.*

*Some delegates [of the refugees] walked angrily out of a workshop on health, accusing the three of obstruction. When one of the three,*

*William Koisser, said the UN Commission would never condone forced repatriation, the refugees were on their feet, citing chapter and verse and naming names in refutation. (Pile, 1984)*

Referring to UNHCR, Mark Malloch-Brown (who played a significant role in that conference), has said: 'We work for no other organization in the political, governmental, or commercial world which has such an absence of mechanisms for determining citizen or consumer satisfaction' (KRC Research & Consulting, 1991).

Robert made another significant contribution to the field of refugee studies and this was to suggest that a publication, *Refugee Participation Network* (RPN), be produced by the RSP in order to get refugee voices heard. This was not done, however, without a strong dose of Robert's diplomatic skills. He called a meeting of NGOs and UNHCR (Jeff Crisp representing UNHCR) in Oxford at the RSP. Robert presented the idea to the assembly and managed to convince them that the idea for the RSP to be the publisher was their own.<sup>9</sup> His primary concern for the publication was that it would reflect refugee voices and emphasize the importance of their participation in policies and practices that directly affected them, reflecting the main message of *Imposing Aid* (Harrell-Bond, 1986).

### STILL IMPOSING AID

Robert kindly wrote the foreword to *Imposing Aid*, and, may I say it, it was perfect! It made all the points that were as crucial then as they are now. I wrote the book believing that humanitarians would want to improve if they just realized the ways they were going awry, but I was so wrong (see Barnett and Weiss, 2008). Robert wrote:

*She takes us intimately into the relations of refugees, hosts, and voluntary and official organizations, laying bare realities which have to be faced in order to learn how to do better ... The danger is, though, that strong reactions will distract readers from learning and from pondering and acting on the many positive lessons of the book ... Another reaction is defensive. Some who work in voluntary, humanitarian, or government organizations may feel threatened by the critical self-examination which the book invites. Some may be tempted to search the text for error to justify rejecting the larger lessons; but if they do so, they, and future refugees, will be the losers. And yet another reaction could be the most damaging: to condemn aid and urge its termination. (Chambers in Harrell-Bond, 1986, pix)*

He goes over the ways 'negative academics' are likely to use the book to 'argue that it would be better to do nothing':

*But before reaching such conclusions, they should reflect: on the terrible suffering; and on how much worse things would be if nothing were done ... The sane and humane thing to do is not to stop aid, but to augment and improve it. Honest examination of reality, however unpalatable, is a necessary painful means to that end. The challenge of this book is to recognize, embrace, and correct error. The message is not to do less, but to do better.* (Chambers in Harrell-Bond, 1986, p ix)

It would be comforting to be able to conclude this chapter with a reflection that his efforts at the time were rewarded with sea changes in the way refugee assistance is managed and that his efforts to encourage refugee participation were rewarded. Sadly, refugee voices continue to be silent and too often brutally silenced (for example, Harrell-Bond, 2008; Ojalehto, 2010).

## NOTES

- 1 I refer to the Refugee Studies Programme or the RSP because it was so named until I retired. David Turton, the next Director got the name changed to the Refugee Studies Centre. We did not name it a centre in the first place because when starting up in 1982, I had a letter from Dr. Shirley Ardener, who was then directing the Centre of Women and Gender Studies at Queen Elizabeth House (QEH), advising me that 'we' did not want another 'centre' in QEH. Not wanting to ruffle feathers, we hit on the Refugee Studies Programme as a name.
- 2 See Harrell-Bond (1986) Chapter 3, 'Deployed like Chessman' for a discussion of the pragmatic use of resources by the refugees, an opportunity *not* available to the hosts.
- 3 Jimmy Betts was born Tristram Frederick Betts in Chesterfield in 1908 and died in 1983.
- 4 The personal collections of papers are among the richest sources of knowledge in the field and the Refugee Studies Centre also now holds those of Paul Weiss (Flynn, 1996), and Derek Cooper's papers from the Middle East (1950s to the late 1990s).
- 5 From the outset, I was trying to find a way to make the RSP library accessible globally. The Forced Migration Online (FMO) became the solution ([www.forcedmigration.org](http://www.forcedmigration.org)). The grey literature collection at the RSC has continued to grow and, to many, it is the most important source to consult. It is always necessary to remind everyone to place their unpublished articles and reports in the FMO where they will be available for researchers so long as the University of Oxford's library exists.
- 6 Keeping a collection of grey literature growing is a challenge. I always encouraged staff to collect as much as possible from NGOs when they were in the field. Sadly, UNHCR burns its country office files every five years, although in Zambia I was able to convince one representative to place one such collection of non-confidential documents in the University of Zambia's library.
- 7 The proceedings were filmed and taped; the papers presented, film and the transcription are part of RSC's library collection.

- 8 These refugees remained in the UK for two weeks following the conference and spoke in many venues around the UK. All returned to their countries of asylum. Ugandan refugees from Sudan were taken on a tour of Eastern Sudan camps by the government official who attended the conference, before returning to the south.
- 9 Vol 1 of RPN was printed in November 1987 and ran until vol 24 (September 1997). The Refugee Participation Network. Full-text, (and searchable) documents are available through the FMO digital library: <http://repository.forcedmigration.org/advanced>, accessed 16 August 2010. There is also a link at the top of the FMO homepage: [www.forcedmigration.org](http://www.forcedmigration.org). The RPN was renamed in 1998 as the *Forced Migration Review* (FMR), and now includes internally displaced people and even has a special issue on the tsunami, reflecting how far the mandate of UNHCR *and* refugee-assisting NGOs and researchers has moved (see Harrell-Bond, 2006).

# Farmer First: Reversals for Agricultural Research

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-14

## INTRODUCTION

In the long and, as yet, unfinished campaign to establish a central role for farmers in agricultural research, Robert Chambers' contribution catalysed and helped to nurture an informal, global coalition of social and natural scientists committed to pursuing the empowerment of poor farmers in agricultural research and development. First addressed in 1983 in his book *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* and developed as a 'parsimonious paradigm' in 1986 (Chambers and Jiggins, 1986), Robert's ideas on this issue challenged conventional wisdom and stimulated the organization of the 'Farmer First' workshop at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in 1987. At this event a group of some 50 people met for five days to share their experience in developing new participatory research methods that attempted to stand the conventional, 'transfer of technology' approach to agricultural science on its head.

The elements of a farmer-first approach were defined in 1987 as reversing conventional research in which scientists set research priorities in isolation from farmers, generate technology on research stations and in laboratories and expect extension services to persuade farmers to adopt their recommendations. Instead, 'farmer-first' sought to establish a complementary approach that defines the farm as an important locus of applied research, the farmer (man or woman) as the central experimenter and the scientist in a supporting role in the co-development of farmer-led innovations. As Robert observed when looking back on the earlier meeting at the 'Farmer First Revisited' workshop held in 2007, many of the original participants were a minority in their organizations, some working in secret

and hiding this work from their colleagues because in the world of conventional agricultural science in the 1980s, these ideas were heresy (Chambers, 2009a).

## A QUIET REVOLUTION

Much more than research methodology has changed in the intervening 20 years, but many of the ideas tentatively characterized as a 'quiet revolution' by the 1987 workshop participants, have been mainstreamed in influential development agencies, notably the World Bank and the international agricultural research community.

Robert's work has catalysed and nurtured this reversal, not only through his energetic pursuit of the cause of participatory research approaches through his own writing, speaking and advice, but just as importantly, in helping to provide visibility and legitimacy to young professionals seeking a foothold for novel research methodologies in agricultural science; still one of the most conservative bastions of reductionism, deep ignorance about the rural poor and single-minded professional bias that Robert took to task in 1983.

As Robert himself is quick to note, this is an unfinished revolution. In 2007, when asked what remains to be done, Robert remarked on the persistent hold of the 'transfer of technology' model in 21st century agricultural research and development; the need to tackle the reform of education in agricultural science, still forming young professionals in the top-down professional mould; and the importance of self-critical reflection to challenge the enduring mindset that encourages scientists to generate technology in isolation from farmers and expect its adoption through transfer by extension services.

Robert continues to be a force for change in 'farmer-first' approaches because he consistently brings to light new ways of looking at the field and he rejects complacency. He reinforces and publicizes the concern now expressed in numerous areas of development, where talk about participatory approaches has attained the status of development orthodoxy, as to why the reversals advocated since the 1980s still confront fundamental institutional barriers (Waisbord, 2008; Hall, 2009).

The NGO statement at the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD) 2010, a convention on future international agricultural research directions, stated the central ideas of 'farmer-first' as self-evident (showing how far from heresy they have come since the 1980s), but expressed the current concern about farmer representation in the governance of research:

*Food providers must be at the center of agricultural research and equally so, in the governance of agricultural research at the international, regional and national levels ... Top-down agricultural research is history. Scientists must learn from poor farmers and with poor farmers, beyond lip service. The crucial role of women in agriculture*

*can no longer remain invisible. Empowering farmers by enabling and supporting local organizations to become equal partners in all stages of agricultural research, development and extension is a responsibility.* (NGO statement at GCARD, 2010)

This chapter is an analysis of the evolution of two of the key themes highlighted in the original Farmer First workshop (Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp, 1989a), as a way to reflect on the influence of Robert's work on the 'reversals' they require: first, legitimizing the role of farmers as active contributors to research rather than passive recipients of improved technologies and, second, enabling farmers' agendas to be put first instead of last in agricultural innovation processes.

I have chosen the theme of reversals for two reasons. First, because 'farmer-first' reflects the larger theme of reversing inequities and injustice that runs through all Robert's work, that of 'putting the last first' and finding ways for the poor to demand and control more of the benefits of development. Second, because one of my enduring images of Robert is when he started a presentation to an audience of farming systems research enthusiasts by taking a map of the world and turning it upside down, to encourage critical reflection. This image characterizes his enduring capacity to surprise us into seeing the world differently, to focus attention on discovery of the unlooked-for and to keep on learning, the key to his contribution that helped to transform 'farmer-first' from a series of workshops into a movement for change.

## LEGITIMIZING FARMERS AS ACTIVE RESEARCHERS

The idea that including farmers as researchers in sophisticated scientific research teams can contribute to crucial aspects of planning and implementing research – accelerating innovation on farms and, in some cases, saving years of costly experimentation station research – took root and blossomed in international agricultural research as part of the rapid spread of PRA throughout the world from 1990 onwards (see Chapters 22 and 23).

Robert's work on PRA at this time helped promote an open learning process around the proliferation and spread of these methodologies. This was especially significant because it coincided with the worldwide collapse of institutional support for farming systems research in the late 1980s. 'Farmer-first' helped to stem this reaction against farmer-centred research approaches by creating a receptive institutional environment for experimentation with farmer participatory research. This in itself was a crucial 'reversal'.

Analysis of the changes that have occurred in agricultural research paradigms since 1987 presents a temptation to indulge in the 'egocentric reminiscence' about one's personal history that Robert warned us against in the Farmer First Revisited workshop. However, a small, personal case history illustrates Robert's

seminal influence in providing external recognition to isolated efforts by marginal researchers to demonstrate the contribution farmers can make to plant breeding in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). External recognition provided the support for many social scientists (of 'last' professional status) to make the transition from secret heresy to legitimate research.

When I joined the CGIAR in 1980, I was informed that international scientists should not work on-farm because this was the job of national programmes. Sociologists were warned against disappearing into the field for the purpose of 'organizing the peasants' and criticizing the green revolution from afar. In the face of this centralized research culture, we social scientists were fortunate in securing the collaboration of a group of young plant breeders in the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) bean breeding programme who, in 1982, were visibly frustrated by the persistent refusal of farmers in the Andean region to adopt improved bean varieties. For years these had consistently out-yielded local checks in regional trials and yet failed to achieve any significant adoption.

After violating the on-farm taboo and tabulating the results from a large number of participatory evaluations by farmers of the breeders' choice varieties, we were able to show that farmers, middlemen and consumers consistently preferred a wide range of other varietal types, all of which had in common a larger grain size than the improved varieties. It happens that in field beans, high yields are correlated with a small grain size, so by selecting for higher yields, breeders were inadvertently selecting against farmers' main criterion for adoption. The findings on bean varieties encouraged the Andean bean breeding strategy to reverse its selection criteria and the breeders went on to introduce a greater diversity of grain types into the programme, achieving successful introduction of a number of improved varieties in the region in succeeding years.<sup>1</sup> Presentation and publication of the preliminary findings of our work on participatory varietal evaluations in the 1987 Farmer First workshop demonstrated that this work was not an idiosyncratic initiative but part of a broader endeavour (Ashby et al, 1989). This was important for gaining institutional tolerance and active support for the expansion of participatory research in other CIAT breeding programmes, including cassava, forages and beans in Africa in the late 1980s.

Publication is crucial for recognition in scientific circles and *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research* (Chambers et al, 1989a) was an important 'first' in this respect for many of the participatory research experiences included in the book. When we presented the results of participatory bean varietal selection at the 1987 Farmer First workshop, we discovered our work was part of a broader effort to demonstrate the same principle: farmers can actively contribute as researchers to plant breeding. Notable was the work of Dr D. M. Maurya who presented his findings on the inventiveness of farmers involved in selecting crop varieties in north India (Maurya, 1989). His work contributed to an important intellectual foundation for the expansion of participatory breeding approaches in Asia fostered by John Witcombe at Bangor University (Witcombe et al, 2005),

national programmes in India, Nepal, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and China among others, and eventually by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

In the 1990s a small group of plant breeders at ICARDA, ICRISAT, CIMMYT, CIP<sup>2</sup> and CIAT and in National Agricultural Research Institutes on three continents began to collaborate with social scientists to build on these initial experiences, generating evidence in maize, barley, millet, potato, field bean and forage breeding programmes on how farmer-first approaches could improve the relevance of plant breeding products to poor farmers (Ashby, 2009a). In Africa, participatory plant breeding now has a central role in the CIP's large-scale programme to improve the nutritional content of sweet potato, in CIMMYT's work on maize breeding, CIAT's bean breeding, in ICARDA and in others too numerous to mention in detail. Today, about 80 participatory plant breeding programmes are known worldwide, many using the most advanced experimental designs and analytical tools of the field (Ceccarelli et al, 2009).

An added aspect of the farmer-first perspective was that it not only brought recognition of the value of farmers' *knowledge* for research to the forefront, but made a goal of establishing an active role for farmers as *researchers*. The explosive dissemination of PRA methods and results, in which Robert's efforts played a pivotal role, led to the first point being widely conceded in the international plant breeding community, and more broadly in other research areas including soils and entomology. However, the second issue remains unresolved: in plant breeding this hinges on whether a breeding programme extracts and uses farmer knowledge or includes farmers in making decisions about the creation of genetic variability.

The introduction to a textbook on participatory plant breeding (PPB), published in 2009 by a cross-section of experts in the area notes that, even after 30 years of experience, few professional breeders accept that farmers can be full partners in a plant breeding programme even though 'experience has taught that PPB is complementary to conventional plant breeding rather than an alternative type of plant breeding' (Ceccarelli et al, 2009, pvii).

Robert's personal and professional commitment to critical reflection and to learning from the unnoticed has stiffened the resolve among farmer-first practitioners to understand and tackle this lapse in the process of change. His early acceptance of the critique that participatory approaches fell short of confronting important power relations has encouraged farmer-first practitioners to increasingly address issues of power and control in the process of agricultural research and development.

## PUTTING FARMERS' AGENDAS FIRST

Progress in reversing the image of farmers as passive recipients of science-driven technology has yet to be matched by equivalent progress in reversing formidable

institutional obstacles to realizing the full potential of participatory approaches, analysed in Robert's book, *Revolutions in Development Inquiry* (2008a). These include inflexible procedures, standards and funding requirements in bureaucratic funding agencies, institutions of higher learning and research systems. Strong vested interests in maintaining this status quo impede changes in power relationships required to transform the way research priorities are defined, resources are allocated and scientists are held accountable to farmers.

In his analysis, Robert stresses the importance of critical reflection and learning for change: his insistence on looking critically at his own personal journey to overcome the power imbalances inherent in 'normal professionalism' is an important aspect of his influence on the evolution of thinking about the issue of power in relation to farmer-first approaches.

In the 1987 Farmer First workshop, giving priority to farmers' agenda was limited to reversals in diagnosis and the 'missing dimension' – the personal attitudes of professional researchers to farmers (Chambers et al, 1989a, p104). Robert subsequently brought the professional challenge of attitudes and values of agricultural scientists to the forefront (Chambers, 1993a) and elaborated on this issue in his book *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997b). He then expanded this analysis to include the reversals in power relationships required for overcoming institutional barriers that block organizational learning about farmer-first approaches. He was quick to promote learning from the critique that legitimizing participation has not been sufficient to achieve the goal of enabling the poor to demand and control more of the benefits of development, pushing us to go 'beyond farmer first' (Scoones and Thompson, 1994, pxiv). Robert's influence in bringing the issue of power 'out of the closet' goes beyond his writing and lies in his willingness to learn and foster new ideas: he inspires us to change our ways of looking at the world by the force of his personal commitment to critical self-reflection. Despite his disclaimers to the contrary, he keeps on demonstrating Gandhi's axiom 'we must become the change we wish to see in the world' with his own practice of reversals (Chambers, 2007c).

By consistently advocating and practising reversals through critical reflection and learning, he reminds us that we cannot be complacent about the institutional obstacles that perpetuate the 'transfer of technology' model in mainstream development policies and practices, notably in public sector agricultural science bureaucracies where it still has a firm grip on the imagination of the majority. For example, Rasheed Sulaiman (2009) shows how, in India, despite having been invalidated in practice and discredited academically, the transfer of technology model still survives because it ensures funding and diffuses accountability for non-adoption of technologies by farmers.

Challenged to confront new ways of thinking about farmer participation, participants in the 2007 Farmer First Revisited workshop articulated a broad consensus around the self-criticism that engagement with power relations remains a significant gap in the practice of farmer-first approaches (Scoones and

Thompson, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Several presentations highlighted building a proactive political coalition including: a world caucus to stimulate policy learning (Hall, 2009); closer engagement with political processes to strengthen farmer organizations and the demand-side of innovation systems (Ashby, 2009b) and the creation of a community of practice with policy researchers and policy-makers (Sulaiman, 2009).

The broad dimensions of the political agenda with respect to farmer-first, participatory research approaches are therefore well understood (Smith et al, 2004). These include:

- Reforming the way farmers' interests are represented in the governance and evaluation of agricultural research institutions.
- Provision of innovative institutional mechanisms by donors that require research resource allocation to incorporate accountability to farmers' priorities.
- Decentralization and 'flexibilization' of the organization of applied research to accommodate location-specific farmer priorities.
- Greater scope in high-level priority setting for input from intelligent diagnosis of farmer-centred research needs.

One of the necessary 'revolutions' Robert identifies in his most recent book (Chambers, 2008a, p181) is expansion of the opportunity for innovators to champion this kind of change.

## WHAT NEXT?

The surest answer to the question 'what next?' is that Robert will continue to innovate, to nurture farmer-first innovators who come into contact with his work and so push forward the revolution of farmer-first approaches. The practical way forward to address the ideas about the type of political engagement discussed at Farmer First Revisited is being attempted (GFAR, 2009). The need to transform university and college teaching of agricultural science to incorporate farmer-first principles and methodologies, highlighted by Robert in his comments at that meeting, is now a growing focus of attention by a number of farmer-first practitioners (Ceccarelli et al, 2009). Whatever the next direction may be, there can be no doubt that those committed to farmer-first approaches will continue to build on Robert's visionary realism, inspired by Robert celebrating the fun of standing conventional wisdom on its head, turning the map of the world upside down.

## NOTES

- 1 There are now hundreds of empirical examples that lend support to the farmer-first hypothesis that farmers can make a unique contribution if given an active role in research. See the Participatory Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA) programme inventory of PPB projects, [www.prgaprogram.org/index.php/plant-breeding](http://www.prgaprogram.org/index.php/plant-breeding), accessed 9 August 2010.
- 2 ICARDA – International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, ICRISAT – International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid-Tropics, CIMMYT – International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre, CIP – International Potato Center.
- 3 [www.future-agricultures.org/farmerfirst/index.html](http://www.future-agricultures.org/farmerfirst/index.html), accessed 9 August 2010

# Agricultural Development: Parsimonious Paradigms

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-15

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout my own career I have encountered Robert Chambers' influence as a force that has moved through the world, sometimes in strange ways. It was from a Jamaican agricultural officer that I learned how to win at 'tug-of-war', a skill passed on to him by Robert who had organized a match at a conference, and revealed the secret of tug-of-war success that Robert himself allegedly had picked up while posted as a youngster to the British Army of Occupation on the Rhine. I remember listening in the 1980s to the stories of a Kenyan farmer who had seen Robert demonstrate mountain rescue techniques at the Nairobi Agricultural Show in the early 1970s. I came across skilled and passionate rice researchers in eastern India whom Robert had inspired while he was working for the Ford Foundation, encouraging them to challenge the orthodoxies of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the conservative Indian breeding establishment in order to develop, together with small farmers, new rice hybrids that performed optimally in their own complex farming systems. Small farmers, many of them illiterate women, and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers in Andhra Pradesh, India, have shown me how they had put to good use what they had learned from and with Robert about ways to develop their own agriculture systems and communities. And who among the hundred or so participants does not remember the year his presentation 'stopped the show' at the International Course on Rural Extension (organized annually at the International Agriculture Centre, The Netherlands, for more than 30 years), when he demonstrated his advocacy of the 'reversal' of power

in favour of small farmers by standing on his head, whereupon one by one the coins in his pocket fell to the floor?

Why the title of this chapter: parsimonious paradigms? It is a phrase that Robert himself used, to emphasize that if agricultural research practice and its fruits are to benefit the millions of small farmers around the world, then professional practice must become sparing of scarce public and private resources (including the time of farmers themselves) and simple to execute in terms of process. Because the interactions between a farm and its social, economic and political context and a plant and its environment are in flux, agricultural research has to offer evolutionary pathways for development as unfolding experience, rather than as a controlled and wholly designed future. This chapter briefly sketches the paradigms that Robert challenged, and forged anew, in his search for how this ideal might be operationalized. Towards the end, I shall ask what impact this has had and whether the new challenges faced by agri-food systems require reinvigorated approaches that incorporate the principles and practices that Robert helped to define.

## EARLY ENCOUNTERS

I first encountered Robert as a 'postal personality' when I was working at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, as a junior researcher charged with filing the flood of grey literature and project documentation elicited by Guy Hunter's pioneering idea of creating a 'postal seminar' that could capture, synthesize and recirculate field experience.

Robert, then working as a District Officer in Kenya, drew attention to two important experiences that he was supporting: first, the work of Joe Ascroft, Fred wa Chege, Joe Kariuki and Niels Röling in developing rigorous market research data on small farmers' needs and circumstances, built on a rapid turnaround of focused sample survey information as an antidote to what Robert called government agencies' 'centrism' (Chambers, 1974; Hunter and Jiggins, 1976); and, second, the effectiveness of (and barriers to) district-wide programme implementation management (PIM), that sought to coordinate a mix of district-level government services in support of small farmer development (Chambers, 1974; see also Chapter 4). These two themes, of driving technology development in agriculture on the basis of feedback from the end-users and carefully specified market opportunities, and building capacity for administrative systems that serve small farmers' interests, have proved enduring passions in his subsequent work.

Robert subsequently is known for his long association with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). As often as he could, he joined the ODI lunchtime seminars, where he continued to challenge the development community with three additional concerns: how government and commercial services could be made accountable to farmers; how information of what small farmers' wanted and needed could drive the mix of services provided; and how the various layers of government

as both enablers and direct suppliers of services could address the huge diversity and variability of circumstance encountered in the field. These have remained vital concerns that he has framed in three powerful questions: whose knowledge counts? (Chambers and Barker, 1987); whose reality counts? (Chambers, 1997b); and whose voice counts? (Chambers, 1998).

Asking the question 'whose knowledge counts?', he demonstrated how all too often it was outsiders' views of what mattered that formed the basis of technology design, service provision and policy. It was people living far from the context, and experts who naturally see the world through their own professional or disciplinary lens, who were defining 'the problem' and the nature of the 'development challenge'. It was their 'understanding of reality' that selected and shaped the technologies and services that were then offered to 'solve' the problem. For many millions of small farmers, but especially those living in the more remote, rainfall-dependent and risky environments, neither the outsiders' problem definition nor the solutions matched their circumstance well enough to be useful. Yet the evidence showed that small farmers' lives continued to change and in many cases improved under their own efforts and by means of their own skills and traditions of knowledge generation and information exchange. Their resources and skills could be put to much better use if their voice could become more decisive in development policy and practice.

## **FARMERS' REALITIES**

The agenda was set for a rich period of experimentation that aimed to bring diverse kinds of knowledge and capacities to generate knowledge closer together in constructive partnerships. Robert's work on seasonality (Chambers and Longhurst, 1986), for example, drew attention to how the lives, employment opportunities, well-being, income, diets and farming activities of people living in rural areas dependent on a single rainfall season fluctuated markedly through the year, and between years (see Chapter 12). It was demonstrated that short one-time visits or surveys taken at any particular time could give a highly skewed picture.

Moreover, 'high-ups' and officials passing through only at the time that roads were motorable and people were well-fed and healthy simply did not see nor understand the depths of misery that could arise at other times of the year (Chambers, 1983). This area of work set the agenda for efforts to decentralize and organize information flows and service provision in ways that took account of this seasonal and inter-annual variability.

Increasingly, the innovations that worked under the hardships small farmers actually experience were shown to involve the negotiation of multi-actor partnerships, a greater role for community-based and farmers' organizations, and new forms of cost-sharing among civil society, private commercial and public actors. Much of the impact of these areas of work on the worldwide development community, as well as on academic researchers and policy-makers, can be directly

attributed to Robert's insistence that good ideas always had to be tested by field experience and that the only ethical goal of all our efforts was that small farmers and poor rural people's lives should improve as a result.

## METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION

I took off in 1979 for a posting in Zambia, but our paths crossed again when we both became involved in an International Labour Organization's (ILO) Basic Needs study. The ILO mission, led by Richard Jolly, included Hans Singer, who made a profound impact on all who met him during this time, as a person deeply committed to matters of child health and nutrition, stimulating us all to think beyond agricultural production to the social, nutritional and welfare outcomes of any agricultural development measure. Robert was a core member of the mission, while I was hired in as a 'local researcher'. I had been designing and leading agricultural and rural surveys in parts of Zambia where most men had left to seek urban or mining work. I had discovered in the process what became recognized as the phenomena of 'female-headed households' and the 'feminization of agriculture'.

At the practical level, I had learned also the folly of trying to administer formal surveys in the daytime with the assistance of well set-up male enumerators who had spent their nights with the lonely women. I had heard about Paul Richards' work in West Africa (Richards, 1979), where he had developed simple gaming instruments to help farmers record and analyse locust build up. I had begun to experiment with a variety of tools and techniques to elicit timely information in more naturalistic encounters, yet of sufficient reliability to be statistically analysed. I had many questions and doubts regarding all of this, because there was scant recognition at the time that this could deliver a 'professional' output.

A three-week field study tour to northern Zambia and Luapula province with Robert during the ILO mission provided an opportunity to share my concerns and experiences, only to discover that Robert himself was actively networking worldwide with others travelling a similar pathway. This work subsequently was pulled together systematically from diverse domains of application and disciplinary traditions to form what became known as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA).

After sharing a tin of sardines with Robert for dinner by candlelight, in a run-down guesthouse somewhere in northern Zambia (transport and accommodation arrangements often failing to materialize as planned in those far-off days before mobile phones), after a wet and somewhat perilous early morning crossing of Lake Bangwelu, then in flood, by means of a dugout canoe, we found that onward progress would be delayed by a day. We put the time to good use by interviewing an old, widowed, female farmer, using some of the techniques we had been discussing.

This was an 'aha!' moment, as we learned together with the farmer an enormous amount, in a short space of time, about her goats, herd composition, goat husbandry practices, breeding management, the seasonal feeding regime, the milk output, disease

management and more, all neatly recorded in system diagrams and charts, notes and sketches, with numbers attached as appropriate. We bubbled with excitement.

### A PARSIMONIOUS PARADIGM

This experience, and that of numerous others working on similar lines across the world, we later synthesized in two long articles published in (a now defunct journal) *Agricultural Administration and Extension* (Chambers and Jiggins, 1987a, b), identifying a 'parsimonious paradigm' for agricultural research and development.

The editor complained that he had never received such a large and mixed reaction. We lost count after the 100-mark came up. Many of the responses were encouraging, but what struck us both was the vehemence of some members of the academic and scientific establishment who felt threatened by our analysis of what was then standard extension and research practice. In their view, what we were proposing as a necessary complementary practice – subsequently known under the generic labels of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Technology Development (PTD) – would undermine science, set aside the contribution of experts, introduce dangerous populism, reinforce the biases of anecdotal experience and thwart the best intentions of those trying to organize the development of the other from the high ground of international organizations and national capitals.

As time went on, Robert positioned himself more and more among those who put their faith in the power of civil society actors to drive their own development, given appropriate support for their own learning, organizational capacities and leadership in ways that were relevant to the context. His persistence and ability to convey to a wide readership with clarity and conviction the nature of such people-centred and grounded practices caught the attention of field-based practitioners, scientists, development administrators, policy-makers and farmers across the world.

But has any of it really changed the way the world works in the field of agricultural development?

### A WORLDWIDE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Robert was not the only researcher to point out that the 'green revolution', focused on new technologies, was passing by the millions of small-scale cultivators and labourers living in risky, remote, resource-poor environments, although he was certainly among the most articulate (see Chambers, 1983). Publicly funded international and national researchers often heard the message – indeed, accepted the force of the message – but still found it hard to restructure professional incentives and organizational priorities in order to 'put farmers first', or to develop as 'standard operating practice' the routines and skills for working in collaboration with farmers and their organizations in such environments.

The impact has been more enduring, and penetrated deeper into professional thinking and practice among NGO researchers and agronomists, and among district and local-level scientists, extension workers and educators. Certain parts of the donor community embraced both the underlying principles and the ‘toolbox’ of methods and skills of RRA, PRA and PTD, and made expertise in these areas an essential requirement in project assistance and in evaluation processes. This in turn helped drive requests for training and training materials, and thereafter also for platforms for sharing experiences in implementation, needs that were for many years supported by the International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED), London (see Chapter 22), and its partners around the world, and indeed by IDS itself.

As the word spread, there was a continuous struggle to maintain quality. The language and tools were all too easily picked up as ‘tricks of the trade’, divorced from understanding of or commitment to principle. When applied as recipes and without understanding of the disciplinary rigour of their origin, the practitioners fell into error, wasting people’s time and leaving the results open to justified criticism. Exaggerated claims were made for the ‘participatory process’ associated with the tools, as a panacea for solving struggles for power and deep-seated structural asymmetries. And yet, in the longer view of history, those inspired by the work of Robert and of the many others joined in a worldwide ‘community of practice’. The self-confident leadership that has emerged from the grassroots as a result of their efforts has changed the way that agricultural research for development is practised and the way that science is placed in society.

This, in turn, connects with other strands of work in other fields. Silvio Funtowicz and Jerry Ravetz (1990), for example, talk of a ‘second order science’, where science is reflective about its purpose and can deal with phenomena that are loaded with embedded values, as matters of poverty, hunger and inequality inevitably are. It also a science embedded in extended peer networks that together define the nature of problems and search for ‘solutions that work’ in a given context.

## FUTURE CHALLENGES

There have been some major changes made in the years since the debates regarding a new paradigm for agricultural research and development started. Agri-food systems are increasingly industrialized, focused on vertical commodity chains and highly efficient production and marketing relationships that span the world. Large multinational corporations dominate the agri-food system and private investments in agriculture far exceed anything the public sector is capable of in an increasing number of countries. The aid landscape has changed too, with flows of resources shifting radically, as new players – from China or Brazil, for example – enter the scene. The role of smallholder farmers in economic development remains hotly disputed, and radically different views exist on the technological ways forward

under increasing natural resource constraints and the surprises generated by climate change.

Yet, there is a broad consensus regarding the incremental and transformative changes that lie ahead. As the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) has shown, 'business as usual is not an option' (McIntyre et al, 2009). For example, reducing agricultural waste and pollution is a priority, as is the need to radically shift fossil fuel and water consumption patterns and greenhouse gas emissions. Conserving agro-biodiversity, improving productivity of soils and protecting ecosystem functioning also represent huge challenges if sustainable agricultures are to become a reality.

There is, however, no agreement at all regarding how to effect these transitions, what form they should take, who will or should regulate and govern food systems and agriculture, and who should participate in priority-setting and decision-making in research and technology development. Yet it is notable that Robert's contribution is not lost among the newly competing voices: one of the most recent of a series of authoritative scientific reports on agricultural research (NAS, 2010) recommends participatory research in which farmers and scientists collaborate in technology development, extension and outreach in order to balance competing demands and develop a more holistic perspective, beyond low costs and high production, on how farms provide benefits to society and the environment. To meet these challenges, a new 'parsimonious paradigm' for agricultural policy, research programmes and food markets is required, one that draws the lessons, and acknowledges the limitations, of earlier debates and experiences.



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# In Search of a Water Revolution: Canal Irrigation Management

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-16

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines Robert Chambers' work on canal management and its influence on irrigation management thinking, methodologies for research and action and the institutions engaged in irrigation research and action. It asks in particular why his influence has been so huge.

Robert's work on irrigation and water management has resulted in three books and 17 published papers and book chapters.<sup>1</sup> The titles of Robert's published works convey a good sense of the subjects that have concerned him: *Managing Canal Irrigation* (Chambers, 1988b); 'Farmers above the outlet' (Chambers, 1986a); 'Canal irrigation at night' (Chambers, 1986b); 'Rapid appraisal to improve canal irrigation performance' (Chambers and Carruthers, 1986); and 'Action research on irrigation' (Chambers and Lenton, 1982). Other titles, on the other hand, make clear the 'poor people first' lens he has used to examine these subjects: 'Irrigation against rural poverty'; 'Food and water as if poor people mattered'; and 'To the hands of the poor'. Nevertheless it is 'In search of a water revolution', the title of one of his first groundbreaking papers (Chambers, 1981c) that most clearly describes Robert's overall goal, to change the mindset of the people and institutions engaged in irrigation and water management matters. To a large extent, he has achieved this goal.

Robert's work has been notable in that almost invariably he has written about what nobody else was writing about at the time. The core of his seminal book, *Managing Canal Irrigation: Practical Analysis from South Asia* (Chambers, 1988b) was all about what he called 'gaps and blind spots': the management of main canal

systems, what happened in canal irrigation at night and what made managers tick. The book drew attention to the methodologies and tools that would be needed to manage canal irrigation effectively, methodologies and tools, especially for appraisal and diagnostic analysis, that he had expected to find when he first started becoming interested in irrigation but was startled to find did not exist.

While the scope of Robert's work on irrigation has been wide, his period of active research and writing on the subject was relatively narrow, spanning a period of only 15 years,<sup>2</sup> and most of his key writings on canal irrigation were published in an even shorter span of seven years between 1981, when 'In search of a water revolution: Questions for managing canal irrigation in the 1980s' was published, and 1988, when *Managing Canal Irrigation: Practical Analysis from South Asia* was first published in India.

Given that the period during which Robert worked on irrigation and water management was relatively short, why has his work made such a large impact? I will attempt to answer this question more fully towards the end of this chapter, but one reason was undoubtedly that, in the late 1970s, Robert not only recognized the crucial role of irrigation in reducing poverty, but also sensed that by working on the subject in South Asia (and India in particular) at that particular time, he had a critical opportunity to influence thinking in a creative way. Clearly, he was right; the decade in which he chose to work on irrigation proved to be enormously fertile and creative, and the centre of gravity of thinking and action on canal management was undoubtedly South Asia.

This decision was, of course, a very fortunate one for me personally because it led to my own association with Robert. From 1981 to 1984 he was based at the Rural Poverty and Resources Program at the Ford Foundation in Delhi, which I had joined a few years earlier. For much of the time that we worked together, he and I not only shared an office but spent large amounts of time travelling together in the field, visiting the tail ends of countless irrigation systems all across India, and spending many hours talking about irrigation. Working with Robert and observing his intense working habits, such as labouring late into the night in his hotel room to record his field notes in detail on his portable typewriter, was a wonderfully educating experience for me as a young professional just beginning to understand development. It also provided an excellent vantage point from which to follow his work closely and see first-hand its influence and how he achieved it.

So let me reflect first on Robert's influence on three levels: irrigation management thinking itself; the methodologies for research and action; and the institutions engaged in this field.

## **INFLUENCE ON IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT THINKING**

To understand properly the influence of Robert's work on main system management, we must remember that when Robert started writing about the subject in the 1970s,

the idea of management itself was almost anathema among irrigation engineers in India and elsewhere. While there was growing recognition that, in practice, irrigation fell far short of its potential for increasing production and reducing poverty, most practitioners at the time felt that this state of affairs was the fault of the farmers rather than the managers. The key challenge for irrigation engineers was the construction of new systems; the management of existing systems, it was assumed, simply took care of itself.

Furthermore, many non-engineers at the time also failed to recognize the importance of main system management. Among agricultural specialists, the main focus was the management of water at the farm level; the conventional wisdom was that 'on-farm' development was the key to agricultural production increases, so beginning to shift the focus upwards, from on-farm development to main system management and beyond, was a huge step forward – an insight now taken for granted but revolutionary at that time. No wonder that when 'Managing the main system: Canal irrigation's blind spot' (Chambers and Wade, 1980) was published in India's *Economic and Political Weekly*, it was a real 'game changer'.

Robert's focus on rural livelihoods rather than agricultural production also had an important influence on irrigation thinking at the time that he wrote on the subject. Conventional wisdom held that the key challenge in water management was to improve agricultural productivity and yields. Robert saw this challenge as important but incomplete; by recognizing the multiple uses of irrigation water and the way in which irrigation could increase labour demand, and thus agricultural wages for the land-poor – especially in the dry season – Robert shifted the debate towards livelihoods and specifically the role of (well-managed) irrigation in generating livelihoods for the poor.

As interest in irrigation management increased, Robert was quick to point out that irrigation management was much more than simply the management of water; it involved the management of people, institutions, financial resources and much more. His work on the motivation systems for irrigation managers, including its links to corruption, helped further shift the focus upwards and paved the way for later work by others on the role of national policies and governance in improving irrigation performance. Likewise, his writing on the role that farmers play above the outlet helped thinking evolve from an initial focus on water-user associations in agency-managed systems to more integrated approaches involving both agencies and farmers.

Importantly, though, in irrigation circles Robert is probably most remembered for his work on canal management, he was also one of the first to draw attention to the challenges and opportunities of groundwater from a common property resources management perspective. Indeed, Robert's early work with Tushaar Shah on the subject, which led to the publication of a groundbreaking book (Chambers, Saxena and Shah, 1989b), was prescient in anticipating and highlighting the importance of sound groundwater management in light of the explosive development of groundwater resources that was to come in South Asia in the years ahead (see Chapter 17).

## INFLUENCE ON METHODOLOGIES FOR RESEARCH AND ACTION

While Robert's substantive contributions in main system management have been crucial in changing prevailing paradigms, an even more important contribution has been in analysing and helping to change the way people think about irrigation.

In writing about irrigation in the 1980s, Robert approached the subject from a poverty, livelihoods and rural development perspective. Conventional thinking on water management, both then and now, focuses on the infrastructure and systems needed to manage and use water rather than the people who manage and use it, but Robert's work reversed the equation by starting and ending with the people rather than the resource, and putting the most vulnerable people at the centre of the issue. By making the connection between canal irrigation and poverty and by articulating the potential for well-managed canal irrigation to reduce poverty, he helped raise the importance of the topic in development circles. His focus on the land-poor, tail-enders and women irrigators helped shift the spotlight from the world of structures and water to the world of the people whose lives could be radically changed through better water access.

Moreover, because Robert comes from outside the normal academic backgrounds of irrigation specialists, he has been able to recognize the professional biases and disciplinary thinking that have created 'blind spots' and led to misdiagnoses and wrong-headed remedies. Robert's highlighting of the dangers of what might be deemed 'normal professionalism', has proved true not only in water management but in many other aspects of rural development. He has not only identified the huge gaps in thinking and perspectives towards irrigation (and the reasons for them) but also made the gaps themselves a subject for research.

In his writings on irrigation in the 1980s, Robert also set about shedding light on those gaps and blind spots by relentlessly looking at the messy practicalities of the reality of irrigation in the field, which stood in sharp contrast to so much laboratory-based work at the time. Robert was a great champion of action research methodologies that combined action on the ground with rigorous research and documentation, but he was also an outspoken critic of action research that aimed to demonstrate that a particular result works by simply creating the conditions for success in a specific location, without consideration of the wider issues of implementation and scaling-up. In his poem 'How to Succeed with Irrigation Action Research', he describes, with great irony and humour, the pitfalls inherent in such research; 'and if you want to get first prize, why then it's best to subsidize', he wrote, adding 'if others fail to replicate ... that's their fate.'<sup>3</sup>

## INFLUENCE ON INSTITUTIONS

One reason that Robert's work on irrigation in the 1980s stimulated large changes in perspective was that he deliberately chose to work in and with the key institutions

that at that time were actively engaged in stimulating new thinking and creating new programmes and institutions.

In the Delhi office of the Ford Foundation, Robert's presence helped foster a sense that we, as foundation staff, together with the people and institutions we supported, could play an important role in advancing thinking and action on irrigation management. It was Robert who emphasized the contribution that foundation staff could make, not only through engaging in grant-making but by developing the subject of irrigation management itself. Robert's important contributions in irrigation management and in methodologies for multidisciplinary action research stimulated, complemented and reinforced the work done by other foundation staff at the time, in India and elsewhere.

Robert's role in the creation of the International Irrigation Management Institute (IIMI), later renamed the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), and its evolution in its early years also needs to be recognized. In particular, Robert not only contributed to early thinking and proposals on the need for an international irrigation institute but he was also one of the three authors, along with Philip Kirpich and Ernst Schulze, of the report commissioned by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in 1982 that led to the creation of IIMI (Schulze et al, 1982). Importantly, this report emphasized the need for a field-based institute with no laboratories and a strong emphasis on action research and the use of irrigation systems as 'living laboratories', which became the key characteristics of IIMI when it was established in 1985. Furthermore, Robert's ideas on methodologies for research and multidisciplinary laid the foundations for the initial research programmes at IIMI. *Managing Canal Irrigation*, published in 1988, when the institute was preparing its first strategic plan, undoubtedly helped influence the directions for research. In fact, as Director General of IIMI at the time the book was published, I remember giving a copy of the book to each researcher at the institute as soon as it came out.

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Clearly, Robert's work on canal management has had a huge impact on irrigation management thinking; on the methodologies for research and action; and on the institutions engaged in irrigation research and action. I attribute this to three interrelated factors: Robert's livelihoods and rural development perspective and his insistence on putting people at the centre of his work; his 'outsider' status that has allowed him to recognize and break away from the normal professional biases and blind spots that had constrained thinking; and his decision to concentrate his efforts on the subject at a time and place that would maximize his impact.

These factors, I believe, hold some lessons for those seeking to make a difference in addressing the water and development challenges the world faces

today, particularly in the context of climate change. They help highlight three major ‘gaps’ in prevailing approaches.

Firstly, the relative absence of lateral thinkers. Robert’s work illustrates the power of people and institutions from other backgrounds to achieve breakthroughs in some fields. This is as true today as it was when Robert was writing about canal management. The recent McKinsey report, *Charting Our Water Future: Economic Frameworks to Inform Decision-Making* (2030 Water Resources Group, 2009) shows what can be done. The report, written by non-water specialists who used methods gained from the energy sector to compare alternatives to meeting competing demands for water, led to some interesting and in some cases surprising conclusions, offering policy-makers a fresh perspective on a critical question (Muller, 2010).

A second gap is the neglect of detailed field research. I believe this is impeding our ability to really know how people are managing and using water in different contexts – and adapting to changing circumstances. Too much current research on critical issues of water management involves looking at computer screens rather than going out to observe and collect primary data. Robert’s insistence on rigorous research and documentation based on primary data is as valid today as it was in the 1980s, with the difference that its absence seems much more apparent now.

The third gap is the absence of other true role models – more people like Robert who are able to change ways of thinking by sheer power of personal inspiration. Part of Robert’s effectiveness and impact has been his ability to motivate others in a range of ways, from his daily interaction with the small group of colleagues in the Ford Foundation’s office in New Delhi to his capacity to reach out, through his writing, to a generation of students across the world who have been captivated by his perspective and ideas. This book is a testament to the personal influence Robert has had on so many of his colleagues and readers, this writer in particular.

## NOTES

- 1 These include, in addition to the works cited in this chapter, Chambers (1979a, 1980c, 1981c, 1984a, b, c, d, 1987a, b).
- 2 Early writing includes Chambers (1975, 1977) and Chambers and Wickremanayake (1977) based on work in Sri Lanka, which was preceded by work in Kenya (Chambers and Moris, 1973); see Chapter 3.
- 3 Reproduced as an appendix in Chambers (1988b).

# The Last Frontier: The Groundwater Revolution in South Asia

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-17

## THE WATER-SELLERS

‘Mr Patel, how can you hold the whole village to ransom by acting like a monopolist water-seller?’ This was Robert Chambers admonishing me one evening in Ford Foundation’s New Delhi office, sometime in 1983. Along with about 20 others, Robert and I were participants in a special play of Graham Chapman’s Green Revolution simulation game set in a Bihar village (Chapman and Dowler, 1982). Ramjibhai Patel was the role I was playing in the game – but in real life, I was a rural economics professor at the Institute of Rural Management at Anand (IRMA) in Gujarat. Kamala Choudhury, its then Director and an admirer of Robert, had wangled an invitation for me to play the game.

Starting as a medium-scale farmer in the first year, I had realized the criticality of irrigation, purchased a well and irrigation tokens. The first year monsoon was good and my well remained unused. But the second turned out to be a drought year. I managed not only to save my rice crop, but also proceeded brazenly to make a killing selling water to other farmers, including Robert, a marginal farmer. Everyone was having a great time, a few like me amassing a small fortune by selling water, but many others – including some Ford Foundation programme officers and Robert – having hard time feeding their families. Later in the evening, when the game was over, I had multiplied my net worth, earned the sobriquet ‘water-Lord Patel’ and was generally abhorred by all those who found me short on empathy

towards fellow farmers. And Robert had concluded that if you started as a rain-fed marginal farmer in Bihar, you had little chance, no matter what.

This was my first encounter with Robert. At the evening dinner, he sought me out and we wondered why the reality in the villages – especially of water markets – plays out differently from the game. We had heard about labour markets, land markets, even lease markets, but never about water markets of the kind that emerged in the game, at least not in India.

IRMA's flagship postgraduate programme in rural management has a ten-week fieldwork component that is not very popular with many professors. Staying in a small village in a poor farmer's home without fans, lights and toilets is no fun. In those days, professors were expected to rough it with students for at least a few weeks, sweating it out with them. For IRMA students, mostly city-bred, it was an exciting once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But for professors, fieldwork was a boring yearly ritual, an unwelcome intrusion on their time, to be suffered as an institutional requirement.

In December 1984, I was spending my mandatory two weeks with two students in a tiny village called Untadi, in Panchmahal – a tribal district of Gujarat. As part of their assignments, students would interview farmers regarding their farm-budgets and turned them in every evening for my scrutiny. A few days later, I found that almost all schedules showed either significant receipts for bore-well water sold or payments made for water purchased. To my amazement, Untadi had a water market remarkably similar to the one Robert and I had played in the Green Revolution game, complete with 'Ramjibhai Patels' who extracted a water price four times higher than the incremental cost of supplying bore-well water. Robert was on my mind during all those days when I was struggling to make sense of what we had found. What puzzled me most was that, even as I quizzed the generally poor water buyers regarding the terrible inequity of their village's water market, they insisted that water-sellers were their benefactors.

I wanted to reach Robert and discuss Untadi with him. But in those days, there was neither the internet nor mobile phones. Calling from Anand to Delhi on a landline sometimes involved a three-day wait. With fieldwork over, students returned to IRMA from various parts of India to present their findings. Katar Singh, a senior IRMA colleague, had accompanied a group of students to a village in Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh; when we presented Untadi's water markets, Katar Singh and his students reported excitedly that their village too had a vibrant water market, that there was hardly any farming household that did not either buy or sell bore-well water for irrigation, and that sellers in the Meerut village sold water from a five horsepower pump at Rs 5/hour compared to the Rs 16–18/hour that farmers in my Gujarat village charged. We decided that, while poor water buyers in Gujarat were happier being exploited by bore-well owners than having no crops at all, those in Uttar Pradesh were in an idyllic situation of getting top-quality irrigation service on-demand, and at a price that was scarcely higher than the cost they would have incurred had they their own wells and pumps.

Water was not my research interest in those days. In any case, I had little understanding of hydrogeology and irrigation. However, I was intrigued by the contrast between Meerut and Panchmahal and I knew that at least one other researcher – Robert – would be as keen to understand and explain the contrast as I was. In the meanwhile, as a Ford Foundation programme officer, Robert had made IRMA a small, flexible research grant to explore natural resources management issues. Over the next year, I used it to compile evidence from several parts of India on the existence and working of water markets. Based on this, I argued in a discussion paper (Shah, 1985) that village-level irrigation service markets seemed pervasive enough to merit closer study, and that the behaviour of water-sellers seemed driven by the pricing of energy used in pumping groundwater. Gujarat's water-sellers charged Rs 16–18/hour because the fuel cost of operating their diesel pumps was Rs 4–5/hour. In contrast, electric tube-well owners in Meerut sold water at Rs 5/hour because, subject to a flat electricity tariff linked to the size of their pump rather than actual power consumed, they viewed their incremental pumping cost as zero. All of them wanted to run their pumps as long as they could to make money from selling water; in the process, they drove water prices down, created a buyers' water market, and generally delighted their customers.

I concluded that Meerut's rich tube-well owners were inadvertently acting as saviours of their poor neighbours at the expense of the Uttar Pradesh Electricity Board because, ironically, the latter's electricity pricing policies produced perverse incentives that left Uttar Pradesh's rural poor hugely better off.

### ACTIVE FIELDWORK

To cut a long story short, I mailed a copy of the discussion paper to a dozen people including Robert, who by now had moved back to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). There was neither response nor feedback for months from anybody; I began to think I was wasting my time on an issue others considered inconsequential. There was hardly any groundwater research in India those days – most focused on improving the energy efficiency of pumps. Much social science thinking regarding irrigation management, research and policy was focused on canal irrigation, which also claimed the bulk of the research funding. Groundwater irrigation was nowhere on the agenda of International Irrigation Management Institute (IIMI) that Robert helped to found (see Chapter 16). Canal irrigation dominated the large bureaucracies that social scientists could influence, reform, reorient, make participatory or accountable, depending on one's persuasion. But groundwater was nobody's baby, despite its rapidly growing share in irrigated areas. Somewhat discouraged, I moved on to other issues, giving up on groundwater.

Then, after several months, I received a long letter from Robert – longer, in fact, than my discussion paper – commenting extensively on various aspects of the argument, emphasizing the value of the hypotheses as well as evidence gathered

and insisting that I must expand and continue with this work. There was soon a chance to meet up when Robert visited Delhi to lecture at a seminar, and we decided to collaborate. This resulted in what turned out to be a series of priceless learning opportunities for me.

The first of these was a ten-day drive from Delhi to Lucknow to Patna, during which we stopped by and explored the working of water markets in some 50 villages at various stages of an evolutionary trajectory. At Lucknow, we were joined by Niranjan Pant, a sociologist and a compulsive sceptic, who received my hypotheses about wily water-sellers contributing to the greater common-good with cold belligerence. In many ways, those ten days transformed me as a researcher. I appointed Robert my mentor and watched closely how he did his research. I imbibed three lessons from this brief mentorship.

The first was his approach to fieldwork. My idea of field research until then was to head to a village, meet people you run into and hope that great insights and ideas will somehow find you. I found Robert practising a kind of ‘active fieldwork’, somewhat like ‘active listening’ that behavioural scientists exhort us to practice in everyday life. He seemed constantly to weigh the quality of information he was getting and sought out richer sources. He used all opportunities – and commandeered all resources available – to expand and deepen his investigation of the issue on hand. In doing this, I found him unconventional, even inventive. From the low-flying plane from Patna to Delhi in December, he counted the number of green and brown fields to estimate the extent of *rabi* irrigation and on a train ride, he estimated the amount of water in drains along railways that could be used for irrigation. On the long drive, even as I would doze off, Robert would be alert, swaying his head left and right to take in as much of the moving landscape and life as he could. He made me work with him on swing-baskets to estimate the volume of water two people could lift manually in an hour. In villages, he would actively seek out poor as well as well-off households to get a balanced perspective. At road-side *dhabas*, where we would stop by for a meal or *chai*, Robert would happily strike up a conversation with any villager to verify, triangulate, explore and learn. Fieldwork time, according to Robert, was a highly precious and scarce resource for a social scientist who must use it most productively.

The second was his approach to social research. I have met few researchers as transdisciplinary as Robert. Indeed, at times, I felt Robert’s approach assumed no pre-existing disciplinary knowledge of relevance and began looking at a problem with a completely open mind. To the economist in me, this was disturbing to the core; but to the management student in me, devoted to problem-solving and lateral thinking, Robert’s approach was refreshing and rare among social scientists. The result, I thought, was mixed; Robert’s analyses sometimes appeared trite to me and at other times, packed with incredibly useful, practical insights.

The third learning opportunity, which has helped me no end, was the alacrity of his daily note-taking during fieldwork. At the end of our field trip, I recall Robert

sitting on the floor in Patna airport, sheets of paper strewn around, putting finishing touches to his field notes, filling gaps, seeking additional information, getting his understandings from interviews triangulated. On a daily basis during field trips, he would enjoin me to take writing field notes seriously. Ever since, I have followed his advice, with amazing improvement in the quality and productivity of my own field research.

## THE GROUNDWATER REVOLUTION

This hugely rewarding ten-day field trip – during which I got to know Robert, the researcher and the human being well – was followed in quick succession by several opportunities to meet, explore and discuss. The culmination was a three-month visiting fellowship at the IDS to work with Robert and N. C. Saxena on *To the Hands of the Poor: Water and Trees* (Chambers, Saxena and Shah, 1989b).

It was during this period that I converted into a full-time ‘irrigation against poverty’ researcher. In long discussions, Robert and I explored farm power supply and pricing policies as among the key levers to manage the groundwater irrigation economy in south Asia. We also developed more fully the argument that these levers can be effectively used to enhance poor people’s access to groundwater, the ‘last frontier’; and equally to regulate groundwater over-exploitation in an equitable manner. Two years after the publication of *To the Hands of the Poor: Water and Trees* (Chambers, Saxena and Shah, 1989b), Gujarat changed its farm power pricing policy to make access to groundwater irrigation equitable; and true to our predictions, water prices in private water-markets throughout Gujarat fell by 35 per cent (Shah, 1993). Eventually, when this created the spectre of resource over-exploitation, Gujarat introduced a scheme of intelligent rationing of power supply as a regulatory device, much as outlined in *To the Hands of the Poor* (Chambers, Saxena and Shah, 1989b) and later detailed in my other works (Shah and Verma, 2008; Shah et al, 2008; Shah, 2009).

While Robert moved on to other pursuits, I stayed with groundwater research to find many of our prognoses coming true in the next 25 years. Robert may not be cited in the vast and rapidly growing south Asian literature on groundwater markets, the energy–irrigation nexus, pump irrigation against poverty and so on, however, he played an instrumental role in being the first to open the door to what was to be a vast, unfolding phenomenon. What we were merely suspecting in the mid-1980s is the irrigation reality of south Asia today (Shah, 2009). Government-managed canal irrigation commands are shrinking, and groundwater irrigation accounts for more than 70 per cent of irrigated areas in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Terai areas of Nepal.

## IMPRESSIONS AND IMPACTS

Some of the ideas closest to Robert's heart regarding farmer participation, attitudinal change among professionals and bureaucrats, 'new professionalism' and 'putting the last first', have been hugely influential. In some seminars where he expounded them, it was visible how inspired some in the audience were. Robert made deep impressions on development professionals, such as Anil Shah of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and civil servants such as N. C. Saxena, who already lived by the ideals that Robert was so eloquently in championing. But, despite this, he failed to impress many Indian academics steeped deep in conservative 'normal professionalism'.

In my view, the ultimate impact of his ideas will remain varied and mixed. The growing corpus of research approaches, under the labels Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and later Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has been a mixed blessing with a huge uptake. One witnesses all manner of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and researchers using these for various purposes to great effect. In many bureaucracies, however, internalization of these ideas remains perfunctory, even mischievous. In irrigation, for example, getting farmer participation in irrigation management has been perversely used as a pretext by agencies to evade accountability and much-needed structural reform. Confronting Robert's ideas with reality has left me with a persistent question – how do attitudes really change, whether it is among farmers, professionals or bureaucrats? A recent turnaround of Gujarat's electricity utility suggested to me that awareness, training and education regarding the need to change dysfunctional attitudes do help. But real-time attitudinal change across a bureaucracy seems to occur only when there is no alternative left.

# Trees as Assets: Legacies and Lessons

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-18

## INTRODUCTION

In early 1986, I had the privilege and pleasure of collaborating with Robert Chambers on a particular idea: that trees could be assets that provided vital forms of savings and security for poor people. A short and focused piece of work resulted in a flurry of interest and publications; the paper eventually appeared in four separate journals focusing respectively on development (Chambers and Leach, 1987, 1989), agriculture and sustainability (Chambers, 1988a; Chambers, Conroy and Leach, 1993), and forestry (Chambers and Leach, 1990). Apparently, this was an idea with a moment. It was a perfect example of Robert's uncanny ability to put a creative and lateral twist on a timely issue, generating wide appeal.

But was this all? Here, I take the opportunity to revisit this particular idea in order to explore its lasting legacies. I suggest that key themes in this work cut tracks and traces – albeit branching, winding ones – through debates around poverty, environment and sustainable livelihoods, social, agro- and community forestry, and knowledge, power and environmental orthodoxies, with those tracks now demanding renewed attention as forestry meets issues of financial instability, disease and climate change. In this tracking, recurring connections with enduring themes in Robert's wide spectrum of work appear. These are themes that have also been key in my work, and around which many of my intellectual engagements with Robert as an Institute of Development Studies (IDS) colleague over the years have turned.

Much of the influence discussed here is not captured in direct citations or explicitly acknowledged impacts on policy (although there have been some of both). So this story also raises interesting issues and challenges amid current debates on

research–policy linkages and impact. As Robert and I reflected in a conversation that helped to inform this chapter, should we have taken more time to push the trees as assets idea, or did it take on a life of its own, becoming the more powerful for that?

### TREES AS SAVINGS AND SECURITY

The idea was simple. As we summarized it:

*Professionals have rarely seen trees as savings banks for poor people. But while trees and their products have become more valuable and easier to market, many poor people have become more vulnerable as contingencies cost more and traditional supports weaken. Consequently, trees have increasing importance and potential as savings and security for the poor, and for use to mete contingencies.*

*For savings and security, trees compare quite well with jewellery, large stock, small stock, land and bank deposits. Disadvantages of trees can include insecure or unclear rights, restrictions on cutting and selling when needed, and problems with marketing; but common advantages include cheap and easy establishment, rapid appreciation in value, divisibility to meet needs closely, and regeneration after cutting.* (Chambers and Leach, 1989, p329)

We went on to argue that more empirical studies were needed, but that available evidence and analysis were already sufficient to point to several important policy implications. These included: ‘Tree reform, improved marketing and prices, and above all investing poor people with secure and full ownership of trees, with rights to harvest, cut and sell similar to the withdrawal rights of depositors in savings banks’ (Chambers and Leach, 1989, p329).

What sparked the idea of focusing in on trees as assets? The idea clearly bridged and connected two important tracks in Robert’s work at the time. The first was a focus on deprivation as not just about poverty, related to inadequate flows of food and income, but also, and vitally, about vulnerability to shocks and stresses. Expressed and publicized so eloquently in *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983) and related articles, this drew key attention to people’s need for assets to insure against vulnerability and provide security against inexorable ratchet effects as these dimensions of deprivation interacted. Second, Robert had been deeply engaged in debates about forestry and rural development in the 1980s, especially in the Indian context and often in collaboration with the formidable N. C. Saxena. In this burgeoning era of so-called ‘social’ forestry, he had been arguing that much of what went on under this label, and related ones such as ‘wasteland development’, was in fact deeply inimical to the interests of poor women and men, depriving them of access and control over needed resources. His book *To the*

*Hands of the Poor: Water and Trees* (Chambers, Saxena and Shah, 1989b) was an India-focused argument against this trend, showing the multiple benefits of rural people's own control over land, water and trees (see Chapter 17).

Robert employed me as his research assistant for six months during 1985–1986 to help assemble material for this book, and it was out of our conversations that the 'trees as assets' idea developed. I was fresh out of a geography degree and preparing for a PhD in anthropology that would eventually take me to the rainforests of Sierra Leone. That Robert was prepared to take a risk on, and then treat as a respected equal, someone with only a decent degree and a few undergraduate fieldwork projects under their belt is testimony to his extraordinary generosity and collegiality. It was also my unbelievable luck, and triggered a set of intellectual engagements and an involvement with IDS that has lasted to the present.

By that time, Robert's work on vulnerability had already inspired me. The social and gender complexities of trees were becoming a passion. Linking them made immediate sense. However, two particular sources that Robert shared excitedly with me provided an essential spark for the idea for – as we first put it – 'trees to meet contingencies'. First, Robert recalls a visit to Western Kenya with Gordon Conway where he was struck by a tiny farm of half an acre that supported a family. He recalls vividly how when he asked why eucalyptus trees were planted along the boundary, the farmer replied 'we sell them in March and April [the dry/hunger season] to buy food and soap'. Second was the poignant account in Betsy Hartmann and James Boyce's *A Quiet Violence: View from a Bangladesh Village* of the tribulations of a Bangladeshi family, which Robert had been using in teaching:

*Abu chops off another root, and continues: 'There is no rice in my household and I have six children to feed. In June I cut down my mango tree and now I am chopping up my jackfruit tree ... Rich people in this country don't understand how my stomach burns' ... Abu arranges the cut roots into a neat pile. 'I'll sell the roots as firewood too' he says, 'Tomorrow I'll carry the wood to town.'* (Hartmann and Boyce, 1983, p167)

Both examples made it into our article where they joined the (semi-successful) outcomes of a search for similar ones. Through a series of always-lively exchanges between us and amongst colleagues in the then Rural Development Programme Area Group at IDS (I particularly remember debating the asset-merits of trees versus camels with Jeremy Swift over endless cups of tea in the IDS cafeteria), the argument took shape.

## LEGACIES

What influence did the 'trees as assets' idea have? Citations of our articles cluster in particular areas of research and policy debate over the intervening decades, which

give us clues as to the tracks and traces, direct and indirect, that are the legacies of the ‘trees as assets’ argument and perhaps its future contribution.

First, the debates about poverty–environment linkages that swirled in the run-up to and around the 1992 Rio Conference drew on the idea both directly (Durning, 1989) and less directly (Leach and Mearns, 1991). In this early era of ‘sustainable development’ debates, it provided a powerful exemplar of much sought-after ‘win–wins’ whereby tree planting and protection could meet environmental and development (reduced poverty, security) objectives simultaneously. The idea was also picked up in related literatures and debates on food security and its environmental dimensions (Shipton, 1990), linking in with Robert’s work with Richard Longhurst on seasonality and poverty (Chambers and Longhurst, 1986; see also Chapter 12). Key strands in these debates – and especially the acknowledgement that poor people will ‘invest’ in environmental resources over the long term provided the institutional conditions are right – also found traces in the central emphasis on institutions in work on sustainable rural livelihoods in the 1990s.

Second, our work was cited quite prolifically in debates on agroforestry during their early 1990s heyday (for example, Scherr, 1995; Thacher et al, 1996). Often constructing distinctions between ‘introduced’ agroforestry systems (alley cropping, intercropping, exotic species) and ‘indigenous’ ones (home gardens, trees in fields, so-called farmed parklands), important strands in this literature asked why it was that farmers planted or preserved trees. Savings and security often figured amongst the answers. Whether they would have done so without our articles is an interesting question. To some extent, it seemed, once the idea had been seeded it provided a lens through which evidence that trees did indeed provide savings and security could come into view. This certainly applied to us in our own work. Thus Robert recalls, in 1990, a Gujarati farmer describing a fodder tree as his ‘final security’. Likewise, in my own work among farmers in the Gola forest area of Sierra Leone, I recorded how villagers treated their cocoa, coffee and fruit trees as ‘long-term assets that can be sold, pledged or mortgaged to meet sudden needs for cash’ (Leach, 1994, p113). Working with James Fairhead in Kissidougou, Guinea a few years later, we wrote of villagers’ anger when loggers with forestry department permits felled the large trees in the forest islands surrounding villages ‘as they receive so little of the value; they are well aware that a mature *Azelia africana* tree would pay a young man’s bride price if he could realise its full cash returns’ (Fairhead and Leach, 1996, p218).

As this last example highlights, the trees as assets argument also chimed with the interest in tree tenure that developed around this time (Fortmann and Bruce, 1988; Rocheleau, 1988). The recognition that bundles of rights to trees and their products could be, and often were, distinguished from rights in the land on which they stood was an important insight of the period. It followed that, in some circumstances, trees and their products could provide savings and security even for those without control over land (which often applied to women and immigrants).

Equally, it was tree tenure, not necessarily land tenure, which determined who had the ability and incentives to invest in trees. The tree tenure literature, and the argument that tree tenure was necessary to provide incentives to plant and protect trees, in turn, helped to inform legal and policy arguments that farmers and local communities should have rights and control over trees, at a time when (in many African and Asian countries) such rights were vested only in state forest departments. Indeed this was a point on which Robert himself had argued long and passionately in the Indian context.

At least in some places, this situation began to shift during the mid-late 1990s, with many countries seeing a suite of reforms to forestry laws and policies. This period also saw the rise of a third key area of relevant research and policy, around community-based, collaborative and joint forest management (Dubois and Lowore, 2000). The policy processes involved in what became a worldwide movement to devolve ownership and management responsibility to local and community institutions were complex and direct influence is hard to trace. Equally, this was part of a move towards 'community-based natural resource management' that was gaining ground in many sectors, from water to fisheries and wildlife, not just forestry. Nevertheless, it is plausible to suggest that 'trees as assets' arguments may sometimes have played a role. Certainly in my own work in Guinea, the vivid exemplar of villagers investing in trees for bride price was found compelling, becoming something of a refrain among the forest officials and NGOs who helped push the policy shift to recognize and legalize 'village forests' in that country in the late 1990s. Community and joint forest management approaches argued that people will preserve trees if they have ownership of and responsibility for them, and that trees and forests sometimes imagined as natural may actually be socially created and valued, for reasons of security among others (for example, Jeffery, 1998).

A fourth area of work concerned professional blind spots and biases, and environmental orthodoxies. We had drawn attention to biases in the training and professional mindsets of both development experts and foresters, which inhibited them from seeing or pursuing the implications of trees as savings. Michael Dove picked up the case directly in his influential exploration of foresters' beliefs about farmers (Dove, 1992), and the argument that this should become a greater focus of research and policy attention. Indeed it became so – although not necessarily through this route – in the form of the broader work on knowledge, power, discourses and 'received wisdoms' in environmental policy circles, and the damaging myths these perpetuate about rural people, which gained ground from the mid-1990s in the IDS Environment Group and beyond (Leach and Mearns, 1996). Of course this theme also harked back to Robert's own influential and long-standing work on the problems of 'normal professionalism' in rural development, and chimed with his arguments about 'whose reality counts' (Chambers, 1997b) in which environment-related illustrations were key.

## GAPS, LESSONS – AND FUTURES?

In contrast with these recognizable tracks of influence – whether direct or indirect – in environment development and forestry thinking, the ‘trees as assets’ argument seems barely to have registered in the broader work on poverty, assets and development that burgeoned in the early 2000s (Moser, 2006). This, with its tracks through to contemporary debates about social protection and rural insurance schemes and its strong shaping by economics, paid virtually no attention to trees. Nor did it take up the opportunity – which our work had emphasized – to explore the characteristics of different assets with respect to poor people’s needs and circumstances, asking, from a cultural economy perspective, who invests in what kinds of assets and why, disaggregating their various qualities, social and symbolic meanings.

Another gap – perhaps an opportunity for influence not followed through at the time – concerned HIV/Aids, trees and security. As the HIV/Aids pandemic hit developing countries, especially in Africa in the late 1980s, attention began to turn to its impact on livelihoods, especially for labour-scarce households with their adult generation hollowed-out by illness and death (Barnett and Blaikie, 1992). The idea that fruit-bearing trees and saleable poles, with low recurrent labour demands, offered good livelihood and security opportunities for households no longer able to cultivate, occurred to Robert but he pursued this only in letters and personal correspondence ‘now lost in the mists of time’. Meanwhile, evidence was building that labour-scarce but market-accessible households – as in Kenya’s Machakos district (Tiffen et al, 1994) – did often turn to trees. That the link to policy was not made then, and has not been since, even amid the mass of subsequent development attention on HIV/Aids-affected households, may be a missed opportunity. Perhaps it is now time to redress this? Amid growing research and policy concern with environment–health linkages of all kinds, a renewed focus on the potential of trees to help people cope might be in order.

In the environment development arena, trees and forests slipped from centre stage in the early 2000s, overtaken by apparently more immediate concerns with water, food, industrial pollution and climate change. But in the most recent stages of the climate change debate they have returned to prominence. Now, however, they are revalued in terms of carbon and constructed as precious sinks to be protected and fostered through schemes such as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD). Much of this latest round of forest policy concern stands out for its profound neglect of two decades of thinking and practice about people, trees and livelihoods (Leach and Leach, 2004). Policy and funding flows emphasize large-scale, government-controlled schemes and carbon markets. Yet arguments for making forest carbon work for the poor, and for the multiple benefits of giving rural people control over trees, are also being pushed (Smith and Scherr, 2002; Bond et al, 2009).

It is in this context that ‘trees as assets’ arguments may in the future find a new intellectual and policy space – within arguments to situate the carbon benefits of trees amidst their other purposes and values, including those that bring security in the multidimensional lives and landscapes that people live.



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# Finding a Sustainable Sanitation Solution: Scaling Up Community-Led Total Sanitation

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*Kamal Kar*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-19

It was an overcast, wet and rainy morning, in August 1990. The jeep was struggling hard to inch through the muddy rural road across the remote forested areas near Muri in Ranchi district in Bihar state (now Jharkhand) in India. Visibility was low due to the torrential rain. The sound of heavy raindrops hitting the canvas rooftop of our jeep and the gnawing of the engine filled the air. It was punctuated by the screeching noise of wheels jamming in the mud. Invited by Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a Ranchi-based non-governmental organization (NGO), I was going to participate in a workshop on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), facilitated by Robert Chambers and James Mascarenhas. Already wet, shoes smeared with sticky mud, I was desperate to reach the venue as quickly as possible to be able to clean and dry myself before joining the workshop. I was already two days late for the five-day workshop; after three failed attempts to reach Muri over the last two days, due to a wave of protests that had paralysed the public transport system, I had almost abandoned the idea of going there.

The workshop venue was an abandoned primary school building, with broken doors and windows, and was often used as a resting place for the livestock herders from the surrounding villages. It lay in the middle of a lush, green, wet paddy field. About 20 participants, mostly from eastern Indian states, were deeply engaged in group discussions on their bedrolls, which were spread on the floor of the room. A portable generator, making a constant noise and belching blue smoke, ran a manual slide projector projecting on the old, patchy wall. Later I gathered that some participants had already left after the first and second day of the

workshop. Perhaps they were disappointed and could not cope with the attitude and behavioural changes required to participate, the basic logistics, the rigour of working in villages and learning from the farmers in the middle of muddy rice fields in full monsoon. Possibly – most likely, in fact – it was the inconvenience of defecating in the open in the rain.

In this chapter, I reflect on how this encounter with Robert set me on a journey that took me from a secure job, as an interdisciplinary team leader and head of an agricultural training and on-farm research institute and a livestock production specialist, to being involved in a global movement to end open defecation through Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS).

## OUR FIRST ENCOUNTER

Reaching the workshop, on that wet August day, I was to have my first encounter with Robert. As we entered the room, a tall and lanky English man warmly welcomed us, and introduced himself as Robert. In the remaining three days of the workshop, we walked around the village and farmland learning from local farmers about their indigenous knowledge, seasonality and many farming practices, and understanding their perceptions of choosing rice varieties.

While we were meeting farmers in small groups in the different hamlets, Robert was hopping from one group to other to see the process of ‘outsider–insider’ interactions. In the evening, Robert called me over to where he sat with his slide projector. He wanted to show me some slides on attitude, behaviour and body language that I had missed in the first two days of the workshop. I then realized that the workshop was not all about agriculture or rural development, but more about our attitudes and behaviour and the desire to learn from those who have been living and working in the area over many generations. I started realizing the huge wealth of local knowledge that those who we often thought of as beneficiaries have. This reminded me of a proverb told by an Indian farmer, which says: ‘In agriculture, those who know, they do it, who can’t do it, teach others and those who can’t teach, take up research, which most do not understand.’

With a specialization in livestock production, I was heading a training institute known as Krishi Vigyan Kendra (Farm Science Centre) that was engaged in ‘on-farm research’, ‘training’ and ‘extension’. The three days of interaction with Robert and exposure to PRA influenced my thinking so deeply that I decided to incorporate the new learning and gradually transform the basic approach of training in major disciplines of my institution to make them more participatory and empowering to local farming communities. Within two months we organized three ‘hands-on’ training workshops on PRA for Natural Resources Management for the Agronomists and Social Scientists of Indo-British Fertilizer Education Project (IBFEP). The results were absolutely fascinating. With the new approach, all those involved – including our agronomists, horticulturists, agricultural

engineer, fisheries and agricultural extension specialists – learned more from the farmers in our adopted villages in six months than we had learnt over the last few years.

In the early years of PRA, when it was mostly used in agriculture and natural resources management, we emphasized attitude and behaviour change of the professionals in training workshops. Participants were put into all sorts of learning activities by the farmers under what we called ‘do it yourself’ (DIY). Some of these included mud-plastering, transplanting, threshing, thatching roof, harvesting, cow-dung cake-making, and so on. I still remember the training workshops Robert and I facilitated for the Senior Scientists of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) and Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BIRI) and for the heads of major NGOs of Bangladesh. Though rigorous fieldwork to learn from local communities had always been very effective and had lasting effects on most participants, some left the workshop, disgusted at being asked to work in the field. It was Robert who emphasized and introduced more action-oriented activities and face-to-face interaction with the farmers, which always helped in breaking the boundaries between outsiders and insiders.

## LEARNING IN ABUNDANCE

I did not realize at the time that this experience was going to be a turning point that transformed my thinking process and eventually my career. Soon I realized that an organization that was focused on top-down technology transfer was definitely not the best place for me to work, and I left my stable and comfortable specialist team leader’s job, with its handsome salary, and started working as independent consultant. It was not easy to arrive at such a drastic decision, which surprised my many friends and colleagues, some of who declared me mad. Robert was my guide; I received much moral support and courage at that crucial stage of decision-making.

I dedicated myself to participatory development approaches in agriculture, natural resources management, livestock, pasture management by herders, decentralized local governance and offered my services as an independent consultant to bilateral and multilateral development agencies, NGOs and international NGOs. My focus shifted gradually towards the cross-cutting themes of ‘participation’ and ‘local empowerment’. I soon ended up working in areas such as urban poverty, slum improvement, water and sanitation. Robert and I maintained our association over the last 20 years of this transformative journey, which was exciting as well as challenging. What was prominent throughout the entire journey was learning in abundance.

Since our first meeting in Muri in 1990, Robert and I worked together on several occasions, facilitating PRA training workshops in Asia and Africa, among them India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia, Kenya and Ethiopia. PRA attracted all sectors and disciplines, and especially funding agencies, NGOs and government

field extension staff, who wanted to use it as a universal solution. Gradually PRA became a fad when tools replaced local empowerment. Scores of nice diagrams, tables, maps and matrices and reports started emerging from all over as the final outcome of facilitation. Real examples of sustainable local actions by communities were few and far between. Agencies offering PRA training increased rapidly in number while some NGO training centres started offering regular training courses on methodology of PRA on a commercial basis. Field extension staff and development professionals who learned PRA tools and techniques through scores of training sessions started using them with little substance. Often I suffered from the realization that the gist of what Robert said in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Discussion Paper 311 (Chambers, 1992), *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research* (Chambers et al, 1989a), and *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b), were not truly understood and internalized by PRA enthusiasts and practitioners.

The bubble grew big very fast and burst too soon. However, like many others, I was thoroughly influenced by Robert's ideas and was struggling in my own way to develop systematic approaches of creating examples of 'community-led' initiatives on the ground with true participation of local communities using PRA tools just as tools.

## BREAKTHROUGHS AND EXCITEMENTS

In 1999–2000, I was leading an evaluation mission of Water Aid Bangladesh and their local NGO partner the Village Education Resource Centre (VERC) of their traditional water and sanitation programme. Although the project apparently achieved its goal in the construction of physical infrastructure, we found human excreta in the open in almost every village we visited. Later, using mapping of open defecation areas, transect walks and calculation of the quantity of faeces per household, when we tried to understand why people defecated in the open, I saw the tip of an iceberg. The CLTS approach emerged from the joint analysis of those who were at the receiving end of all the sanitation solutions developed and prescribed for them by outside specialists.

As soon as the insiders were truly empowered to analyse their own sanitation profile, and to decide and plan on their own, the outcomes were magical, with collective local action to stop open defecation. Within a few years, CLTS spread in more than 34 countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America, enabling millions of rural people to clean up their own environment and change their communities. Until then we did not know how to cross the subtle boundary bordering participatory appraisal and initiation of local collective action. It was indeed a breakthrough.

As I was developing the no-subsidy CLTS approach, which demands no technology prescription or teaching but 'hands-off' facilitation, I was subjected to much criticism from some sanitation professionals, many of who believed

sanitation was not possible without subsidy and external technology. Excited by the community's response with my new experiment and the fascinating outcome from the community triggering exercises, I used to call Robert on phone from Dhaka at the weekends and inform him of developments. We would discuss many issues and share experiences and joy. Robert used to listen to me and with his ever-encouraging words, he supported my ideas and provided many valuable suggestions. Being convinced about the power of CLTS in transforming communities, when Robert took up the issue of scaling-up and spread, things started changing rapidly.

Soon after CLTS covered hundreds of villages in Bangladesh and spread to India, Cambodia and Indonesia, Robert encouraged me to write the IDS Working Paper 184 'Subsidy or self-respect?' (Kar, 2003). Who other than Robert could suggest such an appropriate title of the working paper, which captures the essence of CLTS? That was a breakthrough and that paper still tops the list on the IDS website in terms of number of downloads.

## GOING GLOBAL WITH CLTS

During the South Asia Conference on Sanitation, held in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2001, Robert and I presented no-subsidy CLTS to a global audience of sanitation specialists, ministers and senior policy-makers from Asia and Africa. We left no stone unturned in our efforts to convince the major global players of sanitation of the need for a totally new empowerment approach to total sanitation. With the help of many NGOs and international NGOs – Water Aid, VERC, Plan International, World Vision and others – natural leaders who had emerged from villages free from open defecation were invited to speak and share experiences of CLTS in the conference, coming face to face with important dignitaries.

The World Bank's Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP) was among the first international agencies to support and advocate the CLTS approach and helped at least three national governments to adopt or pilot it (India, Bangladesh and Pakistan). The Water and Sanitation Programme – East Asia and Pacific (WSP – EAP), Jakarta, Indonesia – took a serious interest in introducing the approach in the region. Robert and I clarified the approach and its underlying principle of local empowerment and the dire need for personal and professional attitudinal change. The ideas of no subsidy and no external prescription were not initially appreciated. We were largely misunderstood and were criticized. At some point I was labelled 'neo-liberal'. We did not stop as we were convinced that CLTS was a revolutionary approach that could transform the bleak global sanitation scenario, where more than 2.8 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation.

Our path of spreading CLTS was not easy. Robert and I wrote an open letter regarding going to scale with CLTS appealing to all donors, funding agencies and lenders to focus on funding, 'hands-on' training and follow-up. This was distributed at the EastAsiaSAN in Beppu City in Japan in November 2007, and in AfricaSAN

in February 2008. Rarely have we had a difference of opinions. However, as many advocates of subsidized sanitation wanted to blend CLTS with some forms of subsidy, at one stage I found Robert in a dilemma in choosing a middle path. He was wavering in his stand, moving from no subsidy to some subsidy for the bottom-most layer of the poor. However, he finally came to the position that he did not accept the idea of subsidy and came up with non-negotiable principles of CLTS, with no subsidy as the one most important.

Robert's support in creating space for me to document global experiences of CLTS emerging from different countries in Asia and Africa through my initial trainings resulted in the publication of the first few papers on CLTS. Our ideas of networking between the practitioners of CLTS through the web, action learning and sharing workshops contributed enormously to the spread of CLTS. Robert's paper 'Going to scale with Community-Led Total Sanitation: Reflections on experience, issues and ways forward' (Chambers, 2009b), captures many important angles of CLTS, its potential, the challenges and how it could be a powerful approach in achieving a number of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) directly or through knock-on effects. The *Handbook on Community-Led Total Sanitation* I have written with Robert (Kar and Chambers, 2008) is the basic document used by most CLTS practitioners and has been translated and published in Bengali, French, Hindi, Portuguese and Spanish.

## CONCLUSION

Robert's contributions cannot be measured by looking at any particular sector, such as rural or agricultural development, irrigation or sanitation, but stretches beyond in showing the path of true empowerment and building the confidence of local communities. Robert's foresight is incredibly powerful and the great confidence with which he supports and guides his fellow colleagues and students alike are rare in the development world.

While working with Robert, I realized the deeper meaning and dire need for changing personal, professional and institutional attitude and behaviour in development, which Robert has been stressing all the time. It has always been great fun working with Robert. I have always had plenty to learn from Robert's personal discipline, great time management skills and humour. Early morning jogging, cycling, working hard in facilitating workshops, reading, writing, through to sipping whisky before dinner, all are synchronized in perfect harmony. Robert's clear vision, conviction regarding local people's ability, forceful writings with reasoning and deliberations enormously contributed in moving CLTS ahead and making it a global movement.

# Technology and Markets

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*Barbara Harriss-White*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-20

## INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Robert Chambers was appointed Deputy Director of Cambridge University's Green Revolution project. It ran from then until 1977 – though there are ways it continues to this day. It was grounded in the kind of long and detailed field research (two years) and an eponymous tombstone of a book (at a price no one with whom we wished to engage could afford) that Robert was soon to find reason to reject. Its Director, B. H. Farmer, decided to split the British team between the research sites so that Robert engaged with the Sri Lankan team at the Agrarian Research and Training Institute and worked on water management first in Sri Lanka and then in India. John Harriss and I did our research in reverse order and worked first with the Madras University team in rural Tamil Nadu. In the field we all met as ships passing in the night. While John Harriss researched production (see Chapter 21), I worked on distribution, and one way or another have ploughed that furrow for most of the rest of my working life.

While the green revolution was transforming production, a revolution was also afoot in the markets – in what is now called the value, supply or commodity chain. To unpack this, I developed a random sample of pumpset suppliers, fertilizer dealers, paddy merchants and rice millers. To reach them required some 20,000 miles of eventful rural driving over the first 15 months. So my first encounter with Robert and technology was through inheriting his car in Sri Lanka. While he took over my trusty Ambassador, I launched out – ever alert for giant, flinty-eyed monitor lizards sunbathing on the dry zone jungle tracks – in a VW from Kenya whose accelerator cable had a habit of jamming. One day the cable sheared completely. Out from the undergrowth sprang a seller of paper lanterns who simply twisted together dozens of strands of wire filament and knotted the fine plait from

the lamps around the bent broken ends of the cable. If this was bricolage, it was also a memorable example of technological adaptation and there were to be more.

## THE MENTOR AND THE MODERN RICE MILL

It was after fieldwork, when the team was writing up together in the Cambridge Centre of South Asian Studies that Robert, who was then writing up water management (Chambers, 1975), discovered that I was sitting on a technological scandal that I did not know how to handle (Harriss, 1977; Kelly and Harriss, 1982). Without his sustained support, it would surely have gathered dust, but with it a considerable number of livelihoods for poor women were given a reprieve.

In both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, large Modern Rice Mills (MRMs) lay in rusty decomposition, or limped along on unforeseen subsidies, producing rice of no better quality or higher outturn than what streamed out of the coffee grinder that Lewis Grant had adapted for paddy in the 1920s. Similar conditions were later found in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. When the Director of India's National Cooperative Development Corporation wrote country-wide to all managers of MRMs asking for evidence to refute my argument, he received confirmation of it by return of post.

Eventually I tracked down the engineer who said he had helplessly witnessed a fraudulent experiment by a foreign team that had constituted the science base for the revolution in rice processing (see Pacey and Payne, 1985). I saw foreign aid doing harm by doing good – doing good in establishing a bridgehead for foreign technology, but doing harm to the states that unexpectedly had to subsidize an inappropriate technology and to rural labourers whose livelihoods were displaced without compensation. While Robert added the MRM to his catalogue of aid-related projects that make things worse – thereby helping to inspire his campaigns to reverse biases, reverse the learning process and put the last first (Chambers, 1983) – I drew the Hippocratic conclusion that doing no harm was a better objective for my own work than doing good.

In 1974 Robert had moved to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) where other genealogies intertwined. Michael Lipton and Martin Greeley were initiating research into another part of the seasonal post-harvest system, grain storage, first in Andhra Pradesh and later in Bangladesh (Boxall et al, 1978). With a methodology quite different from the revolutionary rapid and participatory methods then under development by Robert – one requiring fine field measurements of the causes of deterioration and losses over different periods of time and in a range of existing technologies – they generated an important result: that while the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) claimed crop losses of up to a third in storage, actual losses averaged one tenth of this, and hence new technology predicated on exaggerated assertions of losses was not being adopted.

The first impact of this experience of technology and development due to Robert's mentoring took the form of a tranche of aid for spare parts. The second

was to stop the diffusion of inappropriate technology. This was briefly successful in the decade before the era of structural adjustment, globalization and jobless growth. Using evidence to argue against the non-compensation of technologically displaced people (also one of the powerful conclusions of Martin Greeley's research (Greeley, 1987) had no effect on policy at the time. It falls on deaf ears even now while we watch a new wave of distress-induced migration from both agriculture and the rural non-farm economy, return migration, land seizures, development-induced displacement and pauperized victims.

## THE 'DINOSAUR QUESTIONNAIRE' AND A DEFENCE OF SURVEYS

*Revolutions in Development Inquiry* starts with a scathing dismissal of survey methods as a way of knowing about rural societies for teaching and policy, let alone as a basis for changing them for the better (Chambers, 2008a, pp1–24). Dinosaur questionnaires are costly, they enslave researchers, are prone to investigator bias, produce bad data and unused evidence. These criticisms are based on the Cambridge Green Revolution project's core surveys in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka to which I was party. While recognizing many of his criticisms, I would never have put the unstopably large questionnaire down to 'arrogance' (2008a, p2); rather I would say it was the unregulated product of mutual learning and polite consideration for the enthusiasm of other team members.

Once one recognizes that, rather than being instruments of laboratory science, surveys are social processes with reflexive subjects, that they are the only way one can understand processes other than the very local, that poor people as well as students, activists and policy-makers need this general knowledge, that there is better and worse practice in surveys and that with the direct involvement of the researcher other ways of knowing may be grafted onto the survey (and not pre-empted by it), surveys can be liberating. As for the tediously slow nature of data processing and the communication of results, the laptop and the internet have enabled the acceleration of both these stages of research.

Despite my reservations about his critique, Robert's attack on orthodoxy, which began more than 30 years before *Revolutions in Development Inquiry*, helped give me confidence to be publicly sceptical of received methods for the study of markets that had privileged the collection of prices and the analysis of allocative efficiency. This reaction has settled into a type of practical field enquiry that is the very opposite of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). While they have spread like wildfire, the way of knowing I use slowly builds a base through gaining systemic and triangulated access to businessmen and bureaucrats. It works through repeated surveys and revisits, eliciting contemporary business, labour-force and policy histories iterated over periods of up to nearly four decades.

The pictures that result from such 'non-positioned' research into the transformation of a local region cannot be painted without a mixed, methodological

palette. This combines surveys, official data and statistical analyses with systemic case material inside markets and states, and with insights from discourse analysis, observation and open-ended interaction as well as archival resources of various kinds (Harriss-White, 1999). Robert's support in the 1970s was one of the forces helping to generate a working lifetime's project, which took different directions to those he invented and championed, but remained in dialogue with his work. This work (on crop commodity markets in Coimbatore, Harriss-White, 1996), highly differentiated market systems in West Bengal (Harriss-White, 2008) and tracking major transformations in one of the original Cambridge study market towns over the past decades (Harriss-White, 2003) has thrown up a huge range of important empirical material generated by such methods and through sustained field engagement over decades (Harriss-White and Heyer, 2010).

Although fairly far removed from the methods Robert has advocated in recent years, he has never publicly criticized such an ensemble of methods either.

## CHANGE AND ITS DRIVERS: LEARNING FOR THEORY

Robert works with what he has called an implicit and emergent theory of change in which institutional dynamism and flux reflects personal and professional behaviour, which is in turn the product of attitudes, motives and principles. Normatively desirable aspects of the former include creative unlearning and openness to plurality, while the latter include respect and equity (Chambers, 2008a). Yet, if on the one hand you recognize complex, even chaotic systems at play in rural development, but on the other hand you suggestively confine the system to the field of aid-donor-driven development then, whatever *actually* emerges – good or bad – the social *theory* of emergence will not only remain implicit, but also contains the possibility of being flawed. This is due to the set of simple interactions that generate the chaotic, self-organizing complexity that is in turn endowed with the capacity to structure its elements being incompletely specified and due to the boundary of self-organization – the whole – being unknown.

My own work has also had to grapple with complexity, plurality and the results of creative unlearning, but starting with reasons for the adoption of inappropriate technology, it was the character of continuity, rather than change, that posed the first theoretical challenge for me: I could not avoid engaging with explanations for the stable co-existence of multiple technologies, forms of production and of ownership. The informal economy – most of the entire economy and almost all the jobs – is socially regulated; and the capillary power expressed in supposedly 'archaic' forms of regulation of what is in fact a modern capitalist economy had to be addressed.

Markets are complex and dynamic phenomena. Agricultural markets are instituted and structured in ways that are not fully dependent on land relations. Theories of institutional change have to account for the simultaneous creation,

destruction, persistence and adaptation of institutions. And if institutions persist, one needs to distinguish between their being due to a lack of challenge or their being due to the effective policing of challenges and of non-compliance. Challenges can take many forms. Incommensurable forms of authority are expressed and negotiated in the economy through gender, caste, ethnicity and religion. They all operate outside the economy as well as inside it. Most scholars regard them as pre-capitalist relics – or institutional ‘impurities’. I see identities as fully modern structures in the reproduction of enterprises and the labour force – they operate in distribution as well as in production, in commodity and money markets as well as in labour markets.

Last but not least – and where I also agree with Robert – development takes place in conditions of normative pluralism, in which, in my research, state and social regulation are resources for capture, as well as institutions through which markets are contested.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVISM

As a self-aware change agent, Robert has engaged with governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations and, through participation and immersion, directly with poor people, while I have studied the economic and political behaviour of local commercial elites and states. On and off some of our work converged for nearly two decades as trustees of ActionAid. Here, Robert exercised a very active trusteeship over the development and practice of participation, immersions and other imaginative pathways for outsiders to develop the empathetic understanding that helps poor people empower themselves (see Chapter 26). In this, ActionAid blazed a trail to be followed later by many other NGOs. He also engaged with the emergence of ActionAid’s early commitment to rights-based development.

By contrast, my work as a trustee called for evaluations of new long-term area-based development projects that were a response to the NGO’s internal criticism of its own secure funding streams from child sponsorship. I was also encouraged to contribute research to feed into action on the problems of rural men and women incapacitated from work by disability, and on the special social and developmental circumstances of those people rendered completely destitute – able to have, be and do nothing. ActionAid also invested in the original ‘Cambridge’ villages where poor people collectively expressed needs for *infrastructure*: in one case water, in another a threshing floor, in a third a meeting place that became a successful marriage hall and has now acquired the trappings of a Hindu temple. We both enthusiastically supported ActionAid’s internationalization, only to find our skills rather stranded on the UK board.

We clearly differ in our understanding of development. Robert’s is ‘good change’ and ‘doing better for the poor’ (Chambers, 1997b, 2008a), emancipating

people directly through participation and agency. His is an immediate conception. Mine is the process of capitalist industrialization (including the industrialization of agriculture), the containment of the opponents and casualties of this contradictory process and the creation of social and political citizens in order finally to release social forces that can transcend it. This is an immanent process as well as an engineered one. In engaging with it I have tried to tread the Hippocratic route. Our two approaches are thought by many to be mutually exclusive and even incompatible, but there is enough overlap never to lack topics of conversation.

Robert has devoted his life to breaking down barriers between teaching and learning. While I think both he and I regret the airbrushing of pedagogy from the university funding agencies' conceptions of the value, relevance and impact of research, we differ in how we have taught policy relevant curricula to the next generation. While I have worked in the mainstream of postgraduate education, Robert has developed and practiced an entire technology of pedagogical interaction with poor people and with people who work directly with them. And it was Robert who advised me to take policy by the scruff of its neck, not to avoid engaging directly with politicians, just as he forewarned me of the likely unintended outcomes of such initiatives.

## **THE FUTURE: COMMODIFICATION AND A NEW INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION**

Robert has consistently stressed the role of personal self-awareness in taking the part of poor people. The self-aware outsider cannot be other than a political force. Robert has sought to change what that political force for development means – from projects and 'things' to people and 'responsible wellbeing' (Chambers, 1997b, 2008a). But he has never addressed capitalism; and capitalism is the system of production in which the relations between people are expressed and mediated through things – through commodities and commodification. 'We' cannot effect 'good change' among people without understanding their relation to 'projects' and things, as well as to the forces and relations in the making and distribution of things that exploit and oppress people. We have to understand capitalism.

For decades I thought that since nothing was more essential than food (and water), their commodification is the most useful keyhole through which to view society, economy and politics. I realized that the working of these basic markets constrains human development – markets guarantee human development for some but not for all. I came to understand that development is impossible without energy. Since the by-products of energy from fossil fuel are causing climate change, it is clear that a new low-carbon, light-materials industrial revolution is very urgently needed. Indeed without it, the poor people whose emancipation Robert champions will suffer – already suffer – just as future generations will suffer worldwide. But this new industrial revolution has somehow to be created

under neo-liberal dispensations with rampant commodification and without developmental states.

The new development also has to begin at home. How can taking the part of the poor not involve working with workers for new, or new-old technologies that minimize their impact on nature – working for generalized human development through a system of provisioning that does not oppress and alienate people and externalize restitution? My journey has therefore come full circle to technology – matter, energy and people as creative social beings. But, instead of pursuing technology as a technical artefact, the first stage must be to join those developing a comparative understanding of old and new technological systems for energy and wage-goods through the political analysis of their production and their markets, even in those paradoxical instances in developing countries where state control is paramount.

This history now finds me working with British and Indian trades unions on technology and jobs that reduce CO<sub>2</sub>. These are not perhaps places Robert would seek for himself, nor even very comfortable or fundable places, but they are where his early mentoring has helped to lead me. Thank you, Robert.



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*Part 3*

# **Methodological Innovations**

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# Village Studies

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*John Harriss*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-21

## INTRODUCTION

In April 1974, I was a young aspirant anthropologist, and I had recently started a second round of fieldwork with the Cambridge Project on Agrarian Change<sup>1</sup> in a village in Hambantota District, in southern Sri Lanka. Such were the challenges, and the opportunities, that the Cambridge Project presented, that I had only very recently left the village in North Arcot District in Tamil Nadu where I had lived for almost a year, researching the social and economic impact of the introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice. Opening my mail in Hambantota one day, I found a letter from our Deputy Director, Robert Chambers, reporting on his visits to villages that we were studying in North Arcot. His notes included some on ‘my’ village and suggested very different ideas about what was going on there from my own. Rather than seeing this as an interesting and constructive intervention, my reaction was one of: ‘How dare this “rural development tourist” (though I do not think that this term was in use at the time) question my judgement?’ I cannot now remember what our difference of view was, but I do know that for the next several months my relationship with Robert was distinctly edgy.

Thanks, however, to his warmth as a (very) human being, and patience with a difficult younger colleague, and to his nose for interesting research questions, he and I eventually got together to work on the comparison of the North Arcot villages. Why were villages within the same fairly small region, where agro-ecological conditions were pretty much the same, so different in terms of outcomes, such as their evident capacity to retain population and accommodate population growth, or their labour relations and wage rates? For me, working closely with Robert on what became the paper ‘Comparing twelve south Indian villages: In search of practical theory’ (Chambers and Harriss, 1977) was an exciting experience, and my hostility towards him turned to a friendship that has endured over the years.

## SEARCHING FOR PRACTICAL THEORY

The moment, in the mid-1970s, was the one at which ‘rural development’ had entered substantially into the development agenda – *Redistribution with Growth* (Chenery et al, 1974) was one significant influence, and 1975 was the year of publication of the World Bank’s ‘Rural development: Sector policy paper’ (World Bank, 1975) – and scholars and practitioners were searching, precisely, for ‘practical theory’ to guide rural development policy. One approach that seemed to hold promise was to try to develop general theory from detailed village studies, because these should help to ‘embed’ the analysis of economic activity in a deeper understanding of its wider social context. Understanding more about the factors that accounted for variation between villages should, it was thought, help us to know more about the critical variables in rural development.

This was what was being attempted at the time in the Village Studies Project, directed by Michael Lipton, at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (Lipton and Moore, 1972). Lipton and his colleagues had collected together large numbers of village studies, such as those that had been completed over the previous 20 years by India’s Agro-Economic Research Centres, and they then tried to compare these studies systematically.<sup>2</sup> What Robert and I attempted to do was roughly comparable, but we were at a great advantage compared to our IDS colleagues, because we were examining a small number of villages in the same region of south India, about which we had substantial data sets collected through the same research instruments, and of which we also had at least some personal knowledge.

Our venture in some ways reflected Robert’s scepticism about survey methodology and the style of correlational analysis associated with it – but also his sense of the limitations of anthropological village studies; although I think that then, and probably still now, his sympathies lie much more with the anthropologists than with the survey researchers. Still, he saw detailed village studies of the kind that I had done as providing rich and valuable insights, but as being limited with regard to the construction of general theory that would be practically helpful. Could one get beyond the limits of the single case study, while still studying a relatively small number of closely observed cases?

These days, of course, there are sophisticated methodologies for doing just this, as in the approach of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), developed by Charles Ragin and others (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009), that has been applied to at least one set of village studies (those of Robert Wade, from his research on irrigation organization in Andhra Pradesh, see Ragin et al, 2003). QCA aims to make sense of each individual case in a set, and is founded on the strategy of establishing ‘explicit connections’ – by identifying conditions shared by cases with the same outcome, or by examining cases with the same causal conditions to see if they also share the same outcome (Rihoux, 2006). QCA deploys Boolean algebra, and ‘Comparing south Indian villages’ was a far less sophisticated exercise, using a kind of trial-and-error approach, testing different possible causal relationships

– yet our analysis contained some of the rudiments of an approach such as that of QCA.

## HISTORICAL PATTERNS

We were particularly intrigued by the evidence that we collected from the Census of India over the century from 1871 to 1971, showing very different histories of population growth in the various villages. What could explain these differences? Then, what might explain differences in farming practices (and especially the extent of adoption of the new higher yielding varieties of rice)? Or differences in wages? Or differences in significant aspects of social relationships such as the pervasiveness (or not) of patron–client relationships? These we came to take as ‘mainly derivative factors’, while we experimented with location (proximity to tarmac roads and urban centres), differences in resource endowments and variations in the character of the production process in each village as ‘mainly causal factors’.

Location seemed an obvious factor and yet it did not connect up with any explicit outcome. Villages that were comparably close to the small towns of the region differed considerably in terms of the outcomes in which we were interested. One village in particular stood out as having the highest wages, the highest land values and the most intensive agriculture – yet it was the most remote from any urban centre and was not (then) on a tarmac road. Another village, however, also with intensive agriculture and relatively high wages and land values, was well-connected with a nearby town. We realized, too, that the nature of the connections between urban centres and villages depended a good deal upon connections of caste and kinship. Where the business people of the town came from a different caste community than that of the farmers of a village, then proximity to town might not exercise much influence – and vice versa.

When it came to resource endowments, we confronted the problem of identifying a suitable measure, and we lacked data in sufficient detail on such aspects of these endowments as variations in soil quality. But we were aware that one significant factor on which we did have data, from the (land revenue) settlement reports for each village (mostly conducted between 1913 and 1916) and from our own survey data (from 1974), was that of the number of wells used for irrigation, and then of the numbers of irrigation pumpsets in relation to the numbers of wells. These, we thought, would influence the extent of double or even triple cropping and hence that of the gross cropped area. So as a ‘rough order-of-magnitude solution’ we chose to examine the ratio of population to the number of acres cultivated, and worked out connections between the histories of population changes and of changes in resources (mainly irrigation sources) and their exploitation for each of the villages. What these stories seemed to show up was that there were villages that were ‘saturated’ with people, their populations stabilized through migration, and others that supported population growth through having extended the exploitation of resources or through greater labour-intensity.

It seemed to us in the end, however, that the most significant single factor and one that tied up closely with the population–resource dynamic, was that of the nature of the production process. There was a continuum, we thought, ‘from, at one pole, quasi-industrial continuous production, and at the other highly seasonal production’ (Chambers and Harriss, 1977, p311). We found quite clear evidence showing that increasing use of groundwater made – of course – for more continuous production and that, up to a point, this would in turn make for more continuous employment of labour and support of higher rates of growth of village populations, as well as of higher rates of adoption of new agricultural technology, higher wage rates and a greater likelihood of the existence of semi-permanent labour relations.

We had, we concluded, found only a germ of a theory of inter-village variation – though it was one that resonated, as it appeared later, with work that was being done by historians of south India at around the same time, who were investigating the implications of differences between ‘wet’ regions with more assured irrigation sources, and more continuous and intensive cultivation, and ‘dry’ ones characterized by marked seasonality (Ludden, 1985). For Robert, however, what was significant was the implication for rural development policy, which was, he thought, that ‘[given that] the problem of supporting populations in all rural areas is bound to become increasingly acute in view of the population projections for the immediate future ... the achievement of continuity of production is an objective which should perhaps be given as much priority as the search for higher yields’ (Chambers and Harriss, 1977, p321).

## IMPLICATIONS AND INFLUENCES

The validity and the practical significance of this conclusion is one that Robert himself helped to establish in his later work on the implications of seasonality in rural economies (Chambers et al, 1981; see also Chapter 12). The importance of ‘Comparing south Indian villages’ in the whole of Robert’s work is, I believe, that it stimulated his interest in seasonality and the recognition of its importance in the dynamics of rural poverty – though I also think that his experience of what could be found out from even short visits to a number of villages contributed substantially to the development of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). Sometime shortly after the conclusion of the Cambridge Project in 1975, Robert organized an informal meeting at IDS at which he asked a number of us (Scarlett Epstein was there, I remember, and A. M. Shah from Delhi University) about the questions that we would have in mind in visiting a village or small rural area for a short time. One of the conclusions from this discussion, that probably informed Robert’s development of RRA, was that working out the calendar of seasonal activity could make for a particularly informative baseline.

But now, with the advantage of hindsight, how well have our conclusions from the comparative study stood up to the test of subsequent history? I myself undertook further comparative work especially on the labour markets of 5 of the original 12 North Arcot villages in the early 1980s. This was part of the follow-up research in North Arcot, continuing the evaluation of the Green Revolution, directed by Peter Hazell and C. Ramasamy (Harriss, 1991; Hazell and Ramasamy, 1991). While bearing out the major conclusions of my research with Robert about the significance of the continuity of production processes, my own later study suggested that we had probably underestimated the significance of the caste structures of villages for the functioning of labour markets and their segmentation. In particular, however, I concluded that the presence of a dominant caste community, such as the Agamudaiyan Mudaliars of 'my' village, who sought to realize a higher social status through the pursuit of what I described as a 'seigneurial' lifestyle – which prompted them to shun cultivation work whenever they could – tended to inflect wage rates upwards and to reproduce paternalistic, dependent labour relations. More recently, Vinay Gidwani has reported similar observations from a region of Gujarat and he has carried much further the analysis of the implications of these findings, in terms of what he calls 'the cultural logic of work'. As he argues, 'discourses of "work" emerge from the pursuit of social status, with surprising effects on labour deployment and contractual arrangements' (Gidwani, 2001, p59).

Later research in North Arcot has, however, most clearly shown up that 'Comparing south Indian villages' focused too narrowly on agriculture and neglected the wider processes of development. Robert and I did not, in fact, take nearly enough account of the local context of each of the villages, and though we recognized migration both into as well as out of the villages, we did not sufficiently appreciate its importance. As Srinivasan commented in a later study of inter-village variation, based on data collected in the course of the third set of North Arcot studies, conducted by Harriss-White and Janakarajan in the early 1990s (Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004), our work 'was based solely on agricultural jobs. Non-agricultural jobs, which were developing slowly, were not included' (Srinivasan, 2004, p79).

My own further research in the villages in the early 1980s showed that perhaps the most important factors affecting changes in rural livelihoods were not to do with agricultural development per se, or the green revolution, but with the development of rural non-agricultural activity (in this small region especially, the development of the handloom silk-weaving industry) and with the increased importance of migration from the villages for work outside, whether locally or to distant urban centres. As work outside the villages became more important, so distance from urban centres clearly became more important than Robert and I had found, as Srinivasan confirmed through the application of factor analysis in his analysis of inter-village variation from census and survey data for the early 1990s. He concluded that:

*Agricultural employment has declined, while non-farm jobs have increased. In 1993–5, nearly one quarter of economically active population was engaged in non-farm activity. When compared with state and national trends, this is quite striking. However, this growth is still structured by proximity to urban locations and other social factors such as caste. (Srinivasan, 2004, p112)*

The most recent studies in the old North Arcot District (it has been divided since the time of our first research there) have further confirmed these findings. From studies conducted in 3 of the original 12 villages in 2009, Arivukkarasi and Nagaraj have concluded that, far from the villages having absorbed population increase, there has been substantial out-migration, including, probably, the new phenomenon of young women going out in search of work ‘in construction sites or brick kilns in the urban centres in the region, or even in relatively far-off places like Bangalore’ (Arivukkarasi and Nagaraj, 2009, p7). At the same time, it appears that the net out-migration of Dalits has been less than that of other communities, probably indicating their continuing disabilities in labour markets outside the villages.

In sum, while the idea that we had 35 years ago, that the establishment of more continuous agricultural production and employment in North Arcot would be a worthwhile policy objective, was perfectly reasonable in the context of the time, it has not happened. It is a moot point as to whether it would have been in the interests of the livelihoods of the majority of poor rural people over time. Evaluation of the benefits and costs of different possible paths of development is difficult. It certainly does not appear from recent research, however, that the shift in employment of people in the villages out of agriculture has been, very much, into ‘gainful, stable, skilled non-farm employment’ (Arivukkarasi and Nagaraj, 2009, p18). It appears likely that any improvements in levels of living and well-being in North Arcot villages that have taken place, have substantially been the result of public interventions in the interest of social welfare, as Barbara Harriss-White argued as the basis of her North Arcot research in the early 1990s (Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004), and as I have suggested too, from recent research in another Tamil village in the same wider region (Harriss et al, 2010). With the advantage of hindsight again, it appears that green revolution agriculture was already running out of steam because of declining returns and ecological problems by the mid-1980s, and there has been no renewal of agricultural development in Tamil Nadu since then, developmentally relatively successful state though it is.

## VILLAGE STUDIES TODAY?

What of Robert’s contribution to village studies? It is certainly striking to me that the tradition of ‘village studies’ that was once vibrant in India, has largely declined

– at least until their recent revival by V. K. Ramachandran and his colleagues at the Foundation for Agrarian Studies ([www.agrarianstudies.org](http://www.agrarianstudies.org)). In part, no doubt, this is a reflection of the decline of the village as a meaningful social entity (see Gupta, 2005), and of the fact that agriculture has, for quite a long time now, not been perceived as being nearly so significant for India's development as it was in the 1970s. It now accounts, after all, for only 15 per cent or so of gross domestic product (GDP), even if it remains by far and away the largest single employer.

That scholars should be less interested now in rural India is certainly understandable. But I also wonder whether the influence of RRA/Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has not been to reduce interest in the more substantial village studies that were the stock-in-trade of the anthropologists, rural sociologists and even of many of the economists of India in the past. If this hunch is right, does it matter? On balance, I think it does, because there are surely grounds for thinking that understanding of what is going on in rural India is not to be derived only from the knowledge of village people themselves – quite apart from the possibility that the knowledge generated through participatory exercises can be subject to bias and even to manipulation by the participants in them, as David Mosse (1995) has shown. I wonder whether evidence concerning the status of women, for instance, that was among the more significant findings of the 1990s studies in North Arcot, would have been produced by participatory exercises. Of course I do not believe that Robert ever intended that other modes of research should be entirely replaced by RRA/PRA, but I worry that for a time at least, the pendulum swung too far in their direction. Intensive studies of small numbers of villages – such as those that have been carried out over the years in the North Arcot studies – are still of high value and they cannot be replaced by PRA exercises.

## NOTES

- 1 The context and the history of the 'North Arcot Studies' that were initiated with the Cambridge Project, directed by the late Ben Farmer, are described by Harriss-White and Harriss (2007).
- 2 Among the several publications of the Village Studies Project see, in particular, Connell and Lipton (1977); and note Dasgupta (1975).



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# Whose Knowledge Counts? Tales of an Eclectic Participatory Pluralist

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-22

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1970s, a methodological revolution has gathered pace with the accelerating evolution of rapid and participatory methodologies and applications spawning a veritable library of approaches and acronyms – Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). One key individual has been at the heart of much of this participatory innovation: Robert Chambers. Without his boundless methodological inquisitiveness, his unrelenting attempts to push epistemological boundaries and his unwavering quest to redefine the very nature of development enquiry itself – to really put the last first – it is unlikely that these participatory advances would have been realized. His is at once a voice of wisdom, sound reason and deep passion, which speaks eloquently about the power of local people to share, analyse and enhance their own knowledge, lives and conditions and to critically reflect, plan, act, monitor and evaluate development options and interventions. In this chapter, we reflect on Robert’s methodological contributions over a period in which we were researchers in the Sustainable Agriculture Programme of the International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED), London, in the late 1980s and 1990s. During that time, we worked together intensively with Robert, our IIED colleagues Jennifer McCracken-Rietbergen, Jules Pretty and Ian Scoones, and collaborators around the world to develop and promote rapid and participatory approaches to research and development.

## ORGANIZED COMMON SENSE: RRA

The journey started with RRA, which began as a coalescence of methods devised to be faster and better for practical purposes than large questionnaire surveys. It drew on insights from social anthropology, emphasized the importance and relevance of situational local knowledge and the importance of getting the big things broadly right rather than achieving spurious statistical accuracy. Sometimes described as 'organized common sense', RRA was about learning how to listen, about getting people out of the office to find out for themselves what poor people's lives were like, about finding out as much as was necessary in order to begin to act. 'Optimal ignorance' and 'appropriate imprecision' were its watchwords (Chambers, 1997b). It did not involve hiring facilitators to run large-scale surveys or produce complex reports full of charts and diagrams, and although it was as much aimed at empowering lower-level public sector professionals as enlightening their bosses, it had little of the aspiration to 'empower' poor people or seed self-help community development initiatives that later participatory variants were to embody.

RRA involved a creative combination of iterative methods including semi-structured interviews, transect walks with observation, social and physical mapping and modelling, local histories, timelines and case studies of change over space and time, scoring and ranking of preferences and options and other visually oriented diagramming techniques (McCracken et al, 1988). The approach was mainly conducted by outside professionals working in multidisciplinary teams who cross-checked information by triangulating data from different sources using this suite of methods (Chambers, 1980b; Carruthers and Chambers, 1981). In the early 1980s, RRA was sometimes also portrayed as cost-effective, especially for gaining timely information, although still with some sense that it was a second-best, 'quick and dirty' option.

Workshops organized by Robert and colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) on Rural Development Tourism (1977), Indigenous Technical Knowledge (1978) and RRA itself (1978, 1979), which brought together researchers and practitioners in search of better ways for outsiders to learn about rural life and conditions, helped challenge this view (Chambers, 1980b; Longhurst, 1981). These insights were further reinforced by parallel efforts in other parts of the world, including the International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal held at Khon Kaen University in 1985 and the collected volume of papers based on that event to which Robert contributed (KKU, 1987). The Khon Kaen conference confirmed the practical value of RRA and elaborated its underlying theory, giving it a conceptual foundation as well as firm empirical support (Beebe, 1987; Gibbs, 1987; Grandstaff and Grandstaff, 1987; Jamieson, 1987). The ideas captured in that landmark volume were reinforced and extended by a series of field exercises and trainings on Agroecosystem Analysis and RRA led by IIED and our partners, building on the work of Gordon Conway and others (Conway, 1985, 1986, 1987; Conway et al, 1987; McCracken, 1988a, b).<sup>1</sup> These efforts helped demonstrate that

RRA principles, concepts and methods, when properly employed, were capable of eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible through more traditional survey methods. In the late 1980s, RRA and related rapid appraisal approaches continued to spread rapidly and were used in numerous countries to gather data on a range of topics, from agriculture to health and nutrition, from forestry and natural resource management to livestock management and from training to rural development planning (Grandstaff and Messerschmidt, 1992).

In the first edition of *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, reflecting the development ethos of the 1970s and early 1980s, Robert wrote: 'The challenge is to find more cost effective ways for outsiders to learn about rural conditions' (Chambers, 1983, cited in Chambers, 1991, p517). But as he would later observe, significantly it was 'our' knowledge and capacity to gain knowledge that seemed to count, not 'theirs'. Sustainability and empowerment were not on the agenda. From then on, he focused his energies on turning the dominant development discourse on its head. He frequently coined simple, but highly compelling sayings that conveyed profound messages, such as 'others can do it', meaning that other people, especially those who are 'lowers' in a particular social context, can usually do much more and much better than 'uppers' believe. But this required those of us who sought to serve as catalysts of change to 'hand over the stick' and 'let them do it'. Not only would this lead to deeper, better analysis, he contended, it would also allow us, the outsiders, to learn more about local priorities and practices in contexts that would otherwise feel threatening because they were hard to predict or control – and enjoy doing it in the process.

## **HANDING OVER THE STICK: FROM RRA TO PRA**

PRA emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The key difference between PRA and RRA (and other more conventional methodologies) lies in the location of power in the research process. In PRA, outsiders convene and facilitate. Local people map, diagram, observe, analyse and act. Thus, the crucial element of PRA lies not in its methods but in the attitudes and behaviour of researchers and facilitators, which in turn determine how, by and for whom the participatory research is conceptualized and conducted. It was soon evident that the practice of PRA raised personal, political and professional challenges that went beyond the bounds of the production of knowledge and information, a crucial theme to which Robert would return time and again.

As these ideas spread, the term PRA soon began to gain currency – in Kenya, for a form of community action planning developed by Charity Kabutha and colleagues at the National Environment Secretariat and Richard Ford and Barbara Thomas-Slyter at Clark University, US, and in India for a multiplicity of group-visual and other participatory processes (Clark University and National Environment Secretariat, 1991; Mascarenhas et al, 1991; Oduor-Noah et al,

1992). Without a doubt, the hub of early PRA innovation was India, with key individuals and organizations such as Sam Joseph at ActionAid, James Mascarenhas and Aloysius Fernandez at the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) and Anil Shah, Meera Kaul Shah and Parmesh Shah at the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) (Chapter 23) all advancing ideas in a number of exciting directions. Robert was in India in the pivotal years of 1989–1991 as visiting faculty member at the Administrative Staff College of India in Hyderabad. He travelled widely across the country, observing what these methodological pioneers were doing, collaborating with them and writing up his reflections. Not bothered by academic conventions, many a photocopied handwritten summary was posted around the world. India was to prove the critical testing ground for Robert's methodological ideas, which he pursued in further experiments in other parts of south and southeast Asia and east and southern Africa.

We were extremely fortunate to have been part of some of Robert's groundbreaking methodological explorations during our time at IIED. On his return from India, a phase of intensive collaboration began between Robert and members of our Sustainable Agriculture Programme team. We shared lessons with others through the publication and distribution of *RRA Notes* (later to become *PLA Notes* and more recently *Participatory Learning and Action*), an informal journal that emerged out of the first IDS–IIED RRA Workshop in 1988 (Chambers, 1988c), which aimed to share practical lessons on methodological innovations among development practitioners. The early issues of the *Notes* were mainly general editions that included short, rather eclectic collections of despatches from the field. That was to change with the launch of bumper issue 13, the *Proceedings of the 1991 PRA Bangalore Trainers' Workshop*, which documented the explosion of exciting experiments that were taking place in India at the time (Mascarenhas et al, 1991). Soon after, a change in editorial policy led to the launch of a series of special issues of *RRA Notes* edited by 'guest editors' to highlight the application of PRA and other participatory approaches in key topical areas, a policy that continues to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Connected by a shared desire to see how agricultural production systems could be understood differently, the team at IIED jointly organized numerous workshops, brainstorming sessions and exchanges during the 1990s that brought together remarkable groups of participatory practitioners from across the planet. A profusion of PRA trainings that IIED helped facilitate, often with Robert's advice or direct input, were undertaken in contexts as diverse as Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, China, Estonia, Ethiopia, France, The Gambia, Germany, Ghana, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Lesotho, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Sudan, Switzerland, Uganda, the UK and Vietnam. These produced a wealth of documentation, including numerous field and training reports and a much-used training of trainers guide (Pretty et al, 1995a). Work focused mainly on applying PRA to a range of agricultural and natural resource themes (for example, Thompson, 1990; Pretty et al, 1995b; Thompson and Pretty, 1996), while some of our more conceptual writings also

addressed the epistemological, political and institutional dimensions of PRA in agricultural research and development (for example, Thompson and Scoones, 1994; Pretty, 1995; Thompson 1995), as well as issues of gender and social difference (Welbourn, 1991; Guijt, 1995; Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1995).

For his part, Robert, who was already well-known for his groundbreaking writings on rural development in the 1970s and 1980s, became increasingly recognized as a leading thinker on PRA. Spurred on by the rapid growth in the use (and abuse) of PRA, he was invited by the editors of *World Development*, the leading journal on international development, to produce three extended articles on the approach (Chambers, 1994a, b, c). These were to come at a pivotal time when interest in PRA was incredibly high in the international development community. The three articles helped establish PRA's credibility in (some) academic circles and provided it with a coherent and well-articulated philosophical, conceptual and methodological rationale.

During this period, Robert was in constant demand as a speaker and trainer, travelling around the world from one workshop or lecture to another. We often received phone calls from him saying he was in London and about to fly off to Bangladesh or Bolivia or Belgium to address a large gathering of development professionals or agricultural scientists or donor representatives and needed to collect materials to take with him. He would arrive in a rush, hair flying, eyes sparkling, in his usual anorak and lightweight travel trousers, apologizing profusely for the imposition and speaking a mile a minute as he stuffed his large backpack full of rough photocopies and the latest issue of *RRA Notes*. He was and remains an enthusiastic ambassador of the publication, whose glowing endorsements helped ensure the quadrupling of subscriptions in a matter of 18 months and the distribution of the publication to organizations and individuals in more than 100 countries. The conversations were peppered with his latest methodological reflections and an excited trading of slides showing methods in action that he wanted to try out on us before presenting them to his next audience. Even in these short exchanges, it was clear that he had the uncanny knack of drawing on diverse sources of ideas and information and an enviable ability to convey them in engaging and accessible ways.

## CHANGING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

The emphasis on the personal as well as the professional was a hallmark of Robert's work throughout the 1990s (Chambers, 1993b, 1997b). In talks, books and papers, he argued that changing the relations between researcher and researched, between those who initiate and those who participate in research and development processes involves fundamental political and personal transformations. This provokes the need for wider institutional changes that accommodate new roles for researchers within a process that is flexible and reflexive, rather than linear in structure. Thanks

to Robert's continuous efforts to make participatory research personal – slowly and sometimes painfully – many conventional researchers and practitioners came to realize that working *with* poor and voiceless people was infinitely more rewarding than working *on* them.

Applications of PRA ran the gamut from natural resource management and agriculture, irrigation management, public health, programmes for equity, empowerment, rights and security, community-level planning, to urban as well as rural development. Much of this work was led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national government agencies, but even large international organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) began employing PRA in their work. Despite – or perhaps because of – this rapid spread and wide acceptance, participatory approaches were soon implicated in some very shoddy practice. Its prevalent use, even in places where it was not appropriate, led to it being called 'the new tyranny' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Reports of these misapplications became all too common and PRA soon gathered a vocal set of critics from both the academic and development communities (Mosse, 1993; Nelson and Wright, 1995). Robert grew alarmed at how frequently organizations and individuals portrayed their work as 'participatory' when it was nothing of the sort. Too often, control of the so-called participatory research or development process remained firmly in the hands of external agents, leaving local people as passive respondents or informants.

Although he held deep reservations, Robert avoided placing himself in the position of participation 'watchdog' or 'overseer', as he did not feel he could make any claim to leadership of a loose, multi-sited, rapidly evolving movement (although, given his prominence, it was a role some asked him to assume). Nevertheless, the poor practice and sham participatory programmes we witnessed worried Robert and us enough to produce a joint statement in 1995 with colleagues from some 15 different countries entitled 'Sharing our concerns and looking to the future' (Absalom et al, 1995), in which we expressed our apprehensions and called for more attention to be paid to issues of quality and personal and professional attitudes and behaviour. That statement was published in *PLA Notes* and widely disseminated through our respective networks.

Robert has used his substantial powers of persuasion to promote participatory ways to empower local and subordinate people, enabling them to express and enhance their knowledge and take action. More recently, he has noted that these approaches – which involve critical reflection and 'sharing without boundaries' – resonate with theories of chaos, complexity, emergence and deep simplicity, especially what he has termed 'SOSOTEC' or 'Self-Organizing Systems on the Edge of Chaos' (Chambers, 2007e). When the objectives are to achieve both quality and scale, the agenda changes and moves beyond branding and boundaries. These can inhibit and limit more than help. It is no longer simply the spread of PRA but participatory approaches, attitudes, behaviours, methods and mindsets that

deserves priority, something on which practitioners from all participatory traditions can agree. Part of that is the capacity to adapt and innovate, as there will always be trade-offs between standardization and scale on the one hand and creativity and quality on the other.

## THE ECLECTIC PARTICIPATORY PLURALIST

Ever one to coin a new phrase, Robert has pointed out that good practice in participatory research and development has moved us towards an 'eclectic pluralism' in which branding, labels, ownership and ego are giving way to sharing, borrowing, improvisation, creativity and diversity, all these complemented by mutual and critically reflective learning and personal responsibility (Chambers, 2008a). Moreover, drawing on his recent experiences with 'participatory numbers' (linking qualitative and quantitative participatory research) he has shown how they can empower local people and at the same time provide rigorous and valid substitutes for some more traditional methods of inquiry (Chambers, 2007d). Ultimately he points out that development researchers and practitioners are now in a different methodological space from a few years ago, a place where participatory approaches can be transformative and drive personal, professional and institutional change.

We are reluctant to call Robert a 'methodological revolutionary', as that implies a singular vision driven by a clear ideology with no room for compromise or evolution in thinking. He is far too critical of fundamentalists of all persuasions and far too disapproving of strict dogma to accept such a narrow appellation. If we take him at his word, he might be better described as an 'eclectic participatory pluralist' (EPP), one with an insatiable curiosity to learn from others, share across conceptual, cultural and linguistic boundaries and always give credit where it is due. In the role of EPP, he has been a catalyst, a facilitator and an inspirational motivator, who has shown us that the potential for new participatory combinations and applications is limited only by our own imaginations and our institutional and professional strictures.

Robert's writings, workshops and field experiments are an ongoing dynamic between diversity and commonality, standardized insights and unique applications. Through his novel work, he continues to show us that there will always be a case for seeking common concepts and principles in participatory methods and approaches. By inventing and improvising each time anew for the uniqueness of each context, he demonstrates that the scope for innovation and discovery is as great as his commitment to emancipatory participation and social transformation. Although the distinctive visual methods of PRA were for so long the hallmark of all things participatory, Robert's work over time has come to focus on ways of living, being and relating, offering 'pedagogies for the non-oppressed' as well as for the marginalized (Chambers, 2004). And living, being and relating are all things he is particularly adept at doing. Long may it continue.

## NOTES

- 1 At IIED, the Sustainable Agriculture Programme produced numerous field reports and training manuals documenting experiences with Agroecosystem Analysis, RRA and later PRA including Conway et al (1987), McCracken (1988a), Pretty and Scoones (1989), Scoones and McCracken (1989), Pretty (1990), Gueye and Schoonmaker Freudenberger (1991), Guijt and Scoones (1991), Theis and Grady (1991), Guijt and Pretty (1992), Pretty et al (1993) and Thompson et al (1994).
- 2 Early special issues of *RRA Notes* included a focus on wealth ranking (RRA 15 – Guijt, 1992), health (RRA 16 – Lammerink and de Jong, 1992), training (RRA 19 – Pretty, 1994), livestock (RRA 20 – Kirsopp-Reed and Hinchcliffe, 1994), urban applications (RRA 21 – Mitlin and Thompson, 1994) and HIV/AIDS (RRA 23 – Welbourn, 1995). For these and other past special issues see: [www.planotes.org/backissues.html](http://www.planotes.org/backissues.html), accessed 16 September 2010.

# Learning to Unlearn: Creating a Virtuous Learning Cycle

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-23

## INTRODUCTION

We have had a long association with Robert Chambers, spanning a good part of our professional lives. It has been a period of much learning – and indeed much unlearning – for us. It has been a period of collaboration with many practitioners of participatory approaches across the globe, in a spirit of learning, discovery and sharing. As Robert himself has often put it: ‘We live in exciting times.’ In this chapter, we reflect on our engagement with Robert over a period of intense experimentation and learning, as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) became Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), and the focus shifted from innovation in methods to an emphasis on attitudes, behaviour and participatory processes, and from localized experiments to the use of participatory methodology for national-level poverty policy research.

## PRA BEGINNINGS

In the late 1980s, while with the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), we were seeking more effective development processes in our work with the rural communities in Gujarat. Among the different ideas and methodologies that we were exposed to was RRA. The methodology seemed to have its uses. However, during the very first set of exercises, we realized that visualization and analysis were

not the prerogative of professionals alone, and that rural people as participants and observers were capable of all kinds of analysis, including mapping, ranking and seasonality analysis, sometimes with more sophistication and ownership than external professionals.

After a three-day RRA exercise in the very first village, we felt that, while we had gained an understanding of the village, people from the village were not actively participating in the process. We also wondered about how to use all the information generated in the process. It just seemed right to take it to the next level and ask some village representatives to present all the visual outputs prepared during the RRA exercise and get the local people involved in making decisions regarding how to use the information and analysis. That drew a blank; the villagers were not able to understand the visuals we had prepared, even though it was developed using all the information they had themselves shared with us! So the RRA methodology was adapted and modified in the very next village. This time the villagers prepared their own visuals and analysis and, as a result, were able to actively participate in the process. The results were astonishing; people started taking interest in the planning process and more and more got involved in the decision-making at the local level (Shah, 2003).

Robert, who happened to be in India at that point in time, was the first to identify the paradigm shift and helped us learn from the experiences. The shift from 'rapid' to 'participatory' with learning, analysis and ownership by the rural community was recognized by Robert at an early stage. He visited us a few times and joined us in the field, where he observed local people preparing their own visual analysis and using the information to plan watershed treatment or reforestation of degraded community lands. Robert encouraged us to further develop the processes and expand the use of participatory methods in our work. We called the process Participatory Rural Appraisal and Planning (PRAP). The communities were now carrying out their own appraisals and preparing their own development plans. Robert's enthusiasm was contagious; he shared these ideas with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and development practitioners in India, and soon was facilitating exchanges and learning between us. Workshops were held at different locations in India and there was much sharing and learning. Initially this included a handful of NGOs, but it did not take long to spread to other NGOs and later, special efforts were made to include different government agencies. An entire issue of *RRA Notes* was based on the experiences shared at the Bangalore workshop held in early 1991 (IIED, 1991). This was just a taste of what was to follow. Robert went on to facilitate learning and experimentation on such a large scale that development thinking and practice indeed experienced a paradigm shift.

## THE SPREAD OF PRA

Robert organized the first south–south immersion and learning workshop (aptly called the Roving Workshop), which we at AKRSP jointly hosted with two other NGOs: ActionAid and the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA). Participants from 11 countries around the world attended this workshop, which moved between three different locations across India. At AKRSP, the workshop was held in the village of Kabripathar, where the international participants stayed for three days to systematically learn from the villagers. Volunteers from another village facilitated the appraisal and planning process, which included preparing a micro-watershed map, forest root-stock assessment, ranking and rating of forest produce, analysis of water resources (including rainfall), seasonality analysis and its impact on livelihoods, social mapping and a village census. Roles had been reversed; professionals were learning from the rural communities, and villagers were the trainers and facilitators. From top-down and one-way, communications were now flowing in all directions. Robert has captured the excitement and learning that accompanied this process in his writing.

Our long process of joint learning and discovery with Robert, and many other practitioners, continued when we moved to Sussex for a few years. We joined Robert both at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and at many other locations around the world, in sharing our experiences, learning and discoveries. Apart from many locations in India, we also travelled with Robert in the early 1990s to many parts of the world, facilitating experimentation and spread of participatory approaches. There was much to learn and unlearn – during workshops, long periods of reflection and in debates and interaction with thousands of development practitioners. Robert is a very supportive team player and is always willing to experiment and take risks. His endless capacity to learn and unlearn, childlike excitement on discovering new ideas or experiences, empathy for rural people and deep insights into rural poverty were very inspiring for us and helped us develop our own ways of looking at rural development.

Acceptance of participatory methodology in development research and practice spread like wildfire during the 1990s. The methodology was adapted and used for implementing development projects in fields as diverse as natural resources management, health care, education, post-natural disaster rehabilitation and resettlement, and livelihood security. PRA methods were also adapted for use in participatory research in a big way, including Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) that were carried out in many countries around the globe. Donor agencies started showing interest, and provided support in sharing and spreading the methodology. Much of it was due to Robert's enthusiasm and tireless efforts to share knowledge and enable networking. IDS, where Robert has been based, became a hub for information sharing on PRA methodology. Collaborations, discussions and debates took place in rapid succession.

## FROM METHODS TO BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES

With galloping acceptance came the inevitable questions on ethics and quality of practice. Many of us who had worked on participatory approaches for many years felt that lack of ethics and rigour was leading to the development of a new participation orthodoxy without any change in behaviour and attitudes. Many donors and development agencies had made it compulsory to use participatory appraisals without understanding the implications on institutionalization and internalization of the learning systems and decision-making processes. This amazing speed of PRA spread was now getting in the way of ensuring institutionalization and quality. Robert was quick to recognize this and enabled a number of us to get together for a workshop at IDS to reflect and learn from sharing our experiences. The focus now shifted from 'methods' to 'behaviour and attitudes' of the facilitators. This reflective process led to issuing an appeal to all fellow practitioners to follow some basic principles of PRA (Absalom et al, 1995). This was a period of reflection where we were also looking at other conditions that are necessary and essential to enable participatory institutions to develop and sustain both demand and supply. A number of us felt that Robert should have written more on this issue. Subsequently, Robert came up with critical reflections and included these issues in his writings (Chambers, 2004).

As is the case with any incremental learning process, new issues and ideas would come up every now and then as our experience with participatory methods and processes expanded. Robert emphasized the importance of the behaviour and attitudes of development professionals that inhibited learning from and with the people for whom development was intended. He spent a lot of time interacting with government officials in various countries and even worked with a number of training institutions, including the Administrative Staff College of India where he was based for two years, when PRA was still evolving. Robert accompanied senior policy-makers and government officials for two to three-day village immersion programmes, when they would stay with a family in the village to learn from their hosts' experiences and appreciate their views. We know that many a bureaucrat has benefited from such insight into rural reality.

## UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY

Another area of Robert's singular contribution is in enabling a better understanding of the complexity and diversity within a farming system (Chambers, 1990). Traditional watershed management systems focused obsessively on conservation and top-down extension methodology, where knowledge was generated by the professionals and then packaged to be transferred to the farmers. Through micro-observation, Robert questioned the standard transfer of technology paradigm. He

emphasized the need for observing micro-environments where farmers concentrate and harvest soil, nutrients and moisture through decades of observation, experimentation and indigenous knowledge appropriate to their particular context, and extract the maximum possible yields. Robert encouraged thousands of soil and water conservation professionals to redefine watershed treatment and influenced a number of NGOs that pioneered this work. Again, Robert's persistent focus on physical observation and indigenous knowledge and his constant desire to learn and unlearn, motivated many technical and development professionals to explore and take risks. Robert did not hesitate to spend time with engineers, foresters, agronomists and the like as he bought rural people's perspectives into the technical disciplines.

## CONCLUSION

As we reflect on Robert's many and varied contributions to development practice over the years, we have to point out that during the 1980s and 1990s, when Robert's writing and thinking were spreading fast across the world, the internet was yet to take root. It is indeed impressive how well Robert's ability to ceaselessly network and put people in touch with others across the globe has worked, and how this enabled all the ideas to travel rapidly. He was instrumental in developing south-to-south networking in a big way, especially between South Asia and Africa. He was tireless in motivating many donor and development agencies to promote south-south learning systematically. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of professionals who were inspired and catalysed by Robert's networking efforts, the number has to be enormous, and it cuts across disciplines and geographical boundaries. He also continues to mentor many development workers and has always believed in open channels of communication, acknowledging, unlike many of the academic traditions, the role of practitioners in development of these ideas. Robert is one of the few people who understands the power of scale and change and worked as a leading social entrepreneur who promoted the use of participatory approaches for bureaucratic and behavioural change.

In the course of our work we have met many people across the world who have been influenced by Robert's work, be it through one of his many popular publications or as a participant in one of his seminars and training programmes. He has made an impression on many of us, reminding us to have a respectful attitude towards learning from the communities we work with; never hesitating to unlearn before learning; always being excited and enjoying learning; and having a strong empathy towards the poor. He also strongly believes in a global community of practice where learning is a two-way process, and change is perpetual for all of us. We always value Robert as a leader of thoughts, a practitioner, perpetual learner, colleague and a passionate advocate for the poor.



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# The Use of Participatory Methods to Study Natural Resources<sup>1</sup>

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-24

## INTRODUCTION

I was an ardent admirer of Robert Chambers long before I met him. He was a person whose books and papers we all read to learn about the pitfalls of ‘development tourism’ and the promise of participatory methods.<sup>2</sup> The first time I met him was in a kitchen in Nairobi where I declared, ‘I feel like I should kiss your feet’ (his feet were, of course, shod in sandals). He immediately responded, not knowing whether I was the Queen of England or the tea lady, ‘No, no! I should kiss your feet’ – very much an indication of the kind of person Robert is, an appreciator of everyone and a firm eschewer of any hint of a cult-of-personality centred on him.

I had learned about Robert’s work on Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and participatory approaches when I was involved in studying agriculture and agricultural development projects in east and southern Africa. It was famous in rural development circles, or at least the ones I moved in. It was not that everyone rushed to embrace his principles, but scorn for development tourism was out and about and research demonstrating the efficacy of participatory research was being done in various places, including in the halls of the conservative Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) research institutes (Ashby, 1987).

When, in 1984, I pitched my tent among the foresters at the University of California, Berkeley and moved into the world of natural resource management, I discovered a very different culture. Forestry practice was based on the assumption that professionally educated foresters knew best. Professional foresters were educated in a relatively small number of schools or departments of forestry, in a technical curriculum. Their education generally included a field school that, among

other things, resulted in strong lifelong bonding. Possibly because much of the practice of forestry was focused on the commercial goal of ‘getting the cut out’, economists were accepted into the profession. Social scientists were not.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, no one was doing participatory research.

This chapter explores an early example of participatory research into natural resources in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s. It includes the elements that explain how participatory research eventually breached the walls of the natural resources, something to which Robert’s work made a major contribution.

## TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL FORESTERS

Early social scientists in the fields of forestry and other natural resource management were not trained in forestry schools. So while they may have noticed that foresters in some ways saw themselves as priests, they themselves did not subscribe to the religion of forestry or the omniscience of the professional forester. Those who came from fields such as rural development knew about, and perhaps had already done, participatory research. As social science (as defined by social scientists) gradually became accepted in forestry, not only did more social scientists flow into the field, they came to form a critical mass. And, as happened in the story I tell later in this chapter, they wanted to learn what other social scientists were doing, including the use of participatory methods, sometimes adopting those methods themselves.

Participatory methods work well in research on local natural resource use and management. Participatory research has produced scientifically valid data. It has helped natural resource scientists do better science, especially policy relevant science (Ballard, 2008). This utility has been probably the most important factor leading to the (albeit still contested) acceptance of participatory research in natural science.

After my encounters with participatory methodologies and with Robert’s work on rural development, it was in 1991 at the University of Zimbabwe Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS), that I finally had the opportunity to experience Robert in action when he and a colleague presented a workshop on participatory methods. At the time, Nontokozi Nabane Nemarundwe and I were doing research on the effects of gendered land and tree tenure on tree planting and on the use and management of indigenous woodlands in two villages in the Mhondoro region of Zimbabwe, which I will call Mombe and Chamitimirefu (Fortmann, Antinori and Nabane, 1997). The original research plan centred on structured interviews of the male head of the household (if there was one) and the senior wife or female household head from a stratified random sample of 27 per cent of the households in each village.

Robert’s presentation at CASS was inspiring. It motivated me to return to my participatory roots. (I had used participatory methods in my dissertation research on what I now know to be legal pluralism in upstate New York, 20 years earlier.) Three things stand out in my memory about that workshop. The first

is the spectacular photos from India – all those fabulous diagrams drawn with coloured chalk. The second was Robert exhorting us to ‘embrace error’. The third is the image of Robert standing up with a book entitled something like *The Rules of Participatory Research*. The first page said: ‘Use your own best judgement.’ The rest of the pages were blank. That book was to come back to haunt me.

After the workshop, Nontokozo and I set about figuring how to make our research process more participatory. Our team of researchers from the village had vetted the questionnaire, changing the language to use local terms, and were doing the interviews. We now added four new activities: participatory mapping, collecting specimens of each tree species named in the surveys, indicator development and presentation of the research results by the local research team. Each added important dimensions to our research.

## PARTICIPATORY MAPPING

The first participatory element that Nontokozo and I added to our research was participatory mapping, something that Robert had demonstrated in the workshop. We asked small groups to make three maps (drawn in the dirt and embellished with sticks, rocks and leaves to indicate trees, graves and the local windmill)<sup>4</sup> of the present location of trees they used and the products they obtained (poles, fuelwood, medicine, green manure, bark for ropes, wood for carving and so on); the location of such trees ten years before (at the time of independence); and the locations where they would like trees to be in ten years. To try to head off the problem of elite dominance of the mapping groups, in Mombe, for example, we began with a group composed of the members of the Grazing Committee, a largely elite organization. To avoid the problem of male dominance (Shona culture is highly gendered), we had separate groups for women and men.

The mapping demonstrated that tree cover had diminished over the past decade. This was by no means an unexpected finding. Exploring this phenomenon through the mapping process enabled us to identify the areas from which trees had disappeared and why. For example, in Mombe, it was the construction of a government secondary school (a decision that had not involved the local community) that had destroyed a sacred forest, rather than excessive use by the community. The mapping demonstrated local awareness of deforestation and preferences for where reforestation should be sited, again refuting the popular image of peasant farmers mindlessly swinging axes.

The mapping process also revealed social stratification in the form of class and gender. First, the maps provided clear evidence of what we had already come to suspect, that the much-touted community woodlot was in fact used and controlled by elites. The village leaders took great pride in the woodlot project that had won an environmental prize. They always spoke of it in terms of being the *community* woodlot. The maps told a different story. The woodlot appeared on only two maps.

The first was the map drawn by the research team. At their insistence, this map was drawn on paper, not in the dirt. They had finished their map when someone suddenly said, 'We forgot the woodlot!' and it was quickly drawn in. The map drawn by the Grazing Committee (elites) also included the woodlot. None of the other groups (men's or women's groups) included the woodlot on their map of where they obtained tree products. This was a literally graphic demonstration of social stratification despite elite rhetoric to the contrary.

The mapping exercise revealed gender stratification and gender difference in three ways. The first demonstrated the relative importance of gender and age. In Shona society, men are considered much more powerful and important than women. But older women and men are respected and are addressed with honorifics. The research team consisted of two women in their 40s and 50s, one 20-year-old woman, and two men in their very early 20s. We gave every research team member a pencil and eraser, so every one of them could draw on the map. In the event, although the women research team members made plenty of comments and gave him instructions, one of the young men drew the map.

A second demonstration of gender stratification occurred during the Grazing Committee's mapping session. The chair of the Grazing Committee had included two women in this group. Throughout most of the session they simply indicated their assent to the map the men were drawing, '*Ndizozo, ndizozo*' (OK, OK). Only when I specifically asked them, did they offer an opinion of their own – identifying a type of place, not mentioned by the men, where they collected fuelwood. These women clearly knew their place and that place to was to sit silently while the men spoke. But they also clearly knew their trees and where to find them.

The separate men's and women's mapping groups revealed an important gender difference. Every group started by drawing the two rivers that bounded the village and their confluence. From there, the men's and women's map showed very different perspectives. After the boundaries, the men drew the roads and the cattle paddocks, a production map. In contrast, women drew a map of social relations, locating each homestead and indicating wealthier households by drawing bigger houses. Onto these very different base-maps, men and women added in trees, women, on the whole, having a more detailed knowledge of trees used for fuelwood and medicine.

The mapping groups also made us aware of the social relationships that underpinned our ability to do research. We had spent a number of months in Mombe before we began the mapping groups and had friends in many of the groups, particularly the women's groups. In addition, my husband (Emery), my son (Scott) and Scott's friend (Tapiwa), sometimes spent time with us in Mombe. So people knew me not only as a researcher with a truck, but also as a wife and mother.<sup>5</sup>

We moved to Chamitimirefu when we began doing surveys there, but we never spent as much time there as we did in Mombe and did not know people in Chamitimirefu as well as we did in Mombe. Here is where the injunction to use

your own best judgement followed by all those blank pages comes in. People in the Forestry Commission had heard about the mapping groups and asked if they could observe one. 'Sure,' we said. So on the day of our very first mapping group in Chamitimirefu, a group of Forestry Commission staff turned up in their four-wheel drive vehicles. In Mombe, the women's mapping groups often turned into a sort of party. I brought squash and biscuits and sometimes someone would turn over a bucket and begin to drum. The mapping itself was an animated exchange of views and a certain amount of hilarity as leaves, twigs, rocks and grasses were pressed into service as symbols of features of the landscape. Although we used the same procedures in Chamitimirefu, including the squash and biscuits, the experience could not have been more different. In front of a group of onlookers, which included white foreigners as well as Zimbabweans, everyone froze – the villagers, Nontokozo and me. Maps were perfunctorily produced. No one had a good time. It was a thoroughly miserable experience for everyone.

That night I lay in my sleeping bag in my tent wondering if there was a special rural sociological hell for researchers who had goofed as badly as I had. I thought resentfully about those blank pages and wished that Robert had actually written some instructions that would have prevented us from coming to grief. I return to this below.

## COLLECTING SPECIMENS

The structured survey asked respondents to list the names of all the trees they used for each of nine purposes (fuelwood, poles and so on). People used the same name for different trees, different names for the same trees and made-up names for unfamiliar trees such as that brought by the primary school headmaster from Banket, which was known as the Banket hedge. To sort out the confusion this created, we collected physical specimens of every plant mentioned. In retrospect, I realize that we were incredibly lucky to have hired Gift Chidare, whose grandfather had taught him about the local flora. While every team member, even the sister of the headmaster who had come to the village from Banket, knew some trees and the ecological conditions in which they grew, Gift knew the most, hands down. It was an excellent reminder that knowledge is not distributed randomly. To be effective, participatory research requires that you identify knowledgeable people.

Collecting the plants identified a problem with the survey. Despite translation, back-translation and 'localization' of language by the research team, some of the specimens named were not trees, not even shrubs. Perhaps the most striking example occurred when Gift waded into the river and emerged triumphantly with an entire water lily plant! I suspect that the problem may have lain in the respondents focusing more on the use than on the category 'tree'. In any event, collecting physical specimens enabled us to weed out the non-tree species. In the end we collected and recorded 122 species – sadly not including that water lily – that were later identified by the staff of national herbarium in Harare.

In the course of participant observation (in this case, collecting firewood), Nontokozi and I – particularly Nontokozi – learned sensitive gendered information that surveys and therefore also the species collection had not picked up. While participant observation is not the same as participatory research, it can constitute an important part of it. In this case, it revealed dimensions of knowledge that no survey would ever elicit. It was not appropriate to share this particular knowledge in a public forum and so we did not. But learning it was an important reminder of how much we did not know, something every researcher needs to remember.

## INDICATOR DEVELOPMENT

In hopes of developing a scale of wealth, I asked the research team for their advice. I had the usual indicators in mind – a tin roof, cattle ownership, scotch cart ownership and so on. The research team immediately challenged my ranking of some widows whom I coded as being in the richest category. ‘No, they are not rich,’ the team told me. But all of them have cattle and Ambuya has a tin roof, I protested vigorously. But their sons gave them these things, the team responded. If their sons die, they will no longer have the income that provides these indicators of wealth. Thus, they helped me to understand that livelihood vulnerability in rural areas is not just a function of biophysical factors such as drought, too much rain, or pest outbreaks. It is also a function of the mortality of one’s children.<sup>6</sup>

The research team also steered me away from physical items of consumption as the sole indicators of wealth. They pointed out that supporting a child in secondary school requires the ability to pay school fees in cash, more if the child attends a boarding school. Thus asking how many of their children (if any) were attending secondary school, where, and whether they attended every term or attended intermittently provided an excellent indicator of the ability to generate cash for families with children of the appropriate age.

## PRESENTING RESULTS

I have always taken my results back to communities where I have gathered data. But this time the research team presented the findings. Each of them chose a topic, I ran the data on my laptop, and then they wrote a report in Shona for presentation at a village meeting. We spent weeks practising. I was terrified that the women and youths, when faced with a forum that is usually the preserve of men, would freeze or get the giggles as they did sometimes during practice. But gradually their thoughts came together and their presentations gelled.

The report back to the village was attended by district dignitaries, the headmaster of the nearby secondary school and most of the village. The meeting began with a very long prayer about trees, in Shona, by Marshall Murphree, the then-

Director of CASS, who was also a Methodist minister. The chair of the Grazing Committee spoke favourably of the project and about how to his surprise he had learned something from women. School children read their essays about trees, which had been bound into a Foxfire book<sup>7</sup> and presented to all the dignitaries. And then the team presented the findings. All eyes were riveted on them as they explained what we had learned in their own words. At least for that moment, everyone knew that outsiders recognized them as experts.

## LONGER TERM EFFECTS

I began with the very naïve notion that being intensely involved in all aspects of the research process would inspire the research team to continue asking questions on their own. I also thought that they would become local experts whom people would consult regarding the research findings. Obviously I had not thought through what it would take to facilitate a process that would enable people to undertake research on their own, including the material support that is needed. This is addressed well by Humphries (Humphries et al, 2008), who describes participatory research that has been going on for 16 years in the steep hillsides above Yorito, Honduras.

I was off in my first perception, but closer on the second assumption. Inspired by the work, a research team member, Wisdom Muza, planted an orchard around his homestead and now supplies other villagers with saplings. Possibly due to the year of systematically interacting with people from every geographical and social part of the village and to their very professional presentations at the final meeting, research team members were selected for a variety of responsible positions in the village.

I do not know what the effect of having their essays bound into the Foxfire books had on the children. I hope it made them self-confident about their abilities.

The experience led people at CASS to adopt more participatory methods in other research projects. Nontokozo used our methods in her dissertation research in the Zambezi Valley (Nabane, 1997), which resulted in her female research assistant being elected as the first woman member of the Wildlife Committee and eventually as its chair.

I wish I could say that our research changed government policy, but it did not. Perhaps the documentation of villagers' detailed knowledge about 22 species of indigenous trees changed a few minds about the intelligence of farmers at the Forestry Commission. But, despite our very clear data, no one was in the least inclined to do anything about improving women's rights to land and trees.

## FINAL REFLECTION

So what about using your own best judgement? The mapping debacle in Chamitimirefu indicated that my own best judgement was deficient. Whatever

was I thinking? I confess that I thought resentfully about the book, with ‘use your own best judgement’ followed by those blank pages, for a number of years. But in retrospect, I realize that while adopting participatory methods significantly increased the quality of the data and, equally important, explicitly recognized the expertise of the research team, probably the most important thing it did was to make me keenly aware of the social relations of research when those social relations reared up and bit me in the nose. And, following Robert’s injunction, I did embrace error and learned to be more attentive to those relations.

Participatory research begins, of course, with a philosophical stance – humility and the acknowledgement that different people create essential knowledge in different ways. There is a suite of methods that can be learned, but without that stance, they are just conventional research methods. There are some questions about the stance and about the methods that arise again and again. Indeed, among the things taught in a participatory research fellowship in community forestry in the US were the ‘questions that won’t go away’ (QTWGAs – pronounced ka-tah-gas).<sup>8</sup> Those and other handouts can be useful to neophytes.

But perhaps it would also be useful to remind students that participatory research is a constant learning process by giving them a small book entitled, *The Rules of Participatory Research* by Chambers. The first page would say: ‘Use your own best judgement.’ But there would also be a second page that said: ‘Embrace error!’. And then the rest of the pages would be blank.

## NOTES

- 1 Dedicated to the memory of Dr Nontokozo Nabane Nemarundwe, my dear friend and colleague in this research, who died far too young on 10 March 2010.
- 2 The following rhyme, which circulated widely at the time, is probably just as timely today: ‘A consultant, it’s said, will think it no crime, to borrow your watch to tell you the time.’
- 3 Nor, I should add, did social scientists pay much attention to natural resources. A faculty member from the Berkeley Department of Sociology once remarked to me: ‘Oh, I see. You study people who live deep in the forest.’ I had the sinking feeling he thought I studied Hansel and Gretel. And for a number of years I was the only person at my professional meetings giving papers on forestry.
- 4 We decided to have people draw maps in the dirt, not on paper, because we thought that pencil and paper would have connotations of school and would, therefore, be intimidating.
- 5 And also as a woman who could not milk a cow and who could not be trusted to cook *sadza* (maize meal porridge) properly. I was always relegated to chopping the vegetables and doing the washing-up.
- 6 The 1991–1992 fieldwork was before the HIV/Aids pandemic really took off in Zimbabwe. When I returned to do fieldwork in 2001, the number of funerals had risen from one in 14 months to three in a week and I saw many grandparents raising their grandchildren without the resources formerly provided by wage-earning children.

- 7 Foxfire books were collections of essays about traditional Appalachian culture written by kids who interviewed older members of the community to learn about this. These essays identified and celebrated many elements of traditional culture that were not recognized and/or denigrated by the dominant culture. I use the term Foxfire book here to denote a compilation of essays written by children based on what they learned from older people in the community about the use and management of trees ([www.foxfire.org](http://www.foxfire.org)).
- 8 See [www.cnr.berkeley.edu/community\\_forestry/Fellowships/participatoryresearch.htm](http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/community_forestry/Fellowships/participatoryresearch.htm) and click on 'Questions that won't go away', for an explanation of the QTWGAs.



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# Participatory Numbers

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*Carlos Barahona*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-25

## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to produce reliable statistics through participatory processes? Over the last 20 years a number of communities, development workers, researchers and even some governments, have been exploring the idea of generating statistics through the use of participatory tools and approaches, sometimes as estimates of populations and other times as experiments, for monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and in some cases for research. But can these numbers be relied upon in the same way as their counterparts that are generated using traditional statistical tools? Is it right to use participatory approaches to extrapolate data outside their local context? Some debate has taken place about these questions and significant progress has been made to the extent that I believe that the answer to these questions is yes.

'Parti-numbers' was the nickname adopted by a group of academics, staff from NGOs and some developing agencies from the north and south, that met a number of times in the early 2000s to discuss whether reliable numbers could be produced through participatory processes. My first encounter with this group was at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, and Robert Chambers was one of the enthusiastic participants. Did Robert initiate the group? I am not sure, but even if this was not the case, his drive and determination to obtain reliable statistics from participation, brought to the discussions a great deal of energy and inspiration. The following topics were among the themes discussed by the group:

- How to produce numerical estimates from participatory approaches in such a way as to be able to face the then common challenge met by others in terms of their reliability and potential bias.

- The conflict between participation as a local process of analysis, and the extraction of information from the locality in order to produce statistics.
- The language barriers between practitioners of participation, and the professional generators of statistics.
- The challenge of developing methodological approaches that achieve a synergy between participatory approaches and statistical methods.
- The ethical problems that derive from the attempt to combine participation with research.

The parti-numbers group provided an ideal opportunity for the exchange of experiences, opinions, frustrations and achievements amongst all those who joined in the discussion.

### THE INFORMATION AND METHODS DIVIDE

There is a big divide between the need, availability and ownership and use of local information, and the type of information that can be used at higher levels (regional, national and international) to inform decisions and make policies. Over the last 20 years, NGOs have made intensive use of participatory approaches for compiling local information for local use, while the higher levels have remained the domain of offices of statistics, economics or planning.

This divide exists not only at an institutional level but also between the people and disciplines who work on participation at a local level, and those who produce numbers for high-level decision-making. For example, it is still the case that statisticians know nothing – with some exceptions knowing just a little (that in some cases may be worse than knowing nothing) – about participatory approaches. The offset to this is that among those engaged in participation, there are gaps in important skills and knowledge that would make their collection and processing of information more reliable and efficient.

The divide has sometimes been made bigger by careless remarks that have been made by one side about the reliability of the information collected by the other. There is, for example, sometimes hard criticism of survey methodology based on arguments over cost, difficulties and unreliability of surveys – including some by Robert (Chambers, 1983) – yet, if done well, surveys can be immensely revealing (see Chapter 20). Meanwhile, some statisticians and economists blindly refuse to accept that numbers generated by communities can be of better quality than numbers extracted by groups of interviewers.

The parti-numbers group created a refreshing and interesting forum for real communication between people coming from different methodological traditions. It became a space where the concept of building bridges between disciplines and seeking synergies between methodologies was the norm, rather than the exception. This constructive environment opened a space to discuss some of the work we were

doing in Malawi at that time and contributed to our efforts to achieve a sensible integration of research methods based on statistical principles while using powerful tools borrowed from participatory approaches.

### HOW MANY FARM FAMILIES ARE THERE?

In 2000 I was working with a number of colleagues in an M&E programme in Malawi for an initiative that distributed agricultural inputs to poor farmers throughout Malawi. Some complex questions were being asked from the M&E process, questions for which traditional approaches to information collection could not offer satisfactory answers. For example, the programme started basing its distribution of inputs on a list of all the 'farming households' in the country that was constructed for the purpose of distributing the benefits by the Ministry of Agriculture. As would be expected, the resulting list was far bigger than the government of Malawi or donors were prepared to work with and, after guesswork process, the size of the list was cut down to an arbitrary number that those making the decisions were prepared to work with.

The important question for the following year was: 'What is the *real* number of smallholder farm families in the rural areas of the country?' A logical way of approaching the estimation of this number would have been to use information from the national census, which had been completed a couple of years beforehand. However, accusations of anomalies and other problems had cast doubts over its results and undercounting was strongly suspected, leading to a lack of confidence in these census figures by the donor communities. In addition, there were other technical difficulties, such as the differences in important definitions used by the Office for National Statistics, for example their use of the word 'household' versus the definition of the beneficiary adopted by the inputs programme as the 'farm family'. These problems illustrate why the option of using only the census data was non-viable. The possibility of asking the officers from the Ministry of Agriculture for better estimates was unlikely to work either, as the incentives that would have produced the initial inflated figures were as relevant in the second year as they were in the first. Village authorities, a local power structure common in rural areas of Malawi, were also perceived as likely to have reasons for exaggerating the number of beneficiaries. Rejecting these alternatives, others thought that the solution might be found by using a public and participatory process to establish, by engaging with communities, the number of farm families in each community. The practice of community mapping had been well established by differing forms of participatory work throughout the late 1980s and 1990s and it was considered sensible to combine this process with a communities' sampling scheme, which followed statistical principles and would allow the estimation of population totals. The technical details of this early experience have been written up (see Levy, 2005, in particular the M&E module on the book's CD) but the important fact is that

estimates of number of beneficiaries were computed by the study. These estimates provoked debates in Malawi and contributed to better informed decisions when setting the levels of the programme in subsequent years.

## METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION

When this work was designed and carried out, the driving force was the need to find appropriate methodologies to answer specific questions, rather than to search for methodological approaches for using participatory tools to generate reliable numbers. What was surprising to me was the reaction of Robert and the parti-numbers group. I am not even sure how the evaluation studies and their methods came to be known by Robert; I can remember being invited to participate in a meeting at IDS, where a group of academics and NGO workers were discussing ‘numbers from participatory approaches’ and to whom Robert was determined that we should present our methods and results. The experience was an eye-opener; it allowed me to appreciate how many people in the north and south were attempting to tackle the same issue of needing more sophisticated tools to answer complex questions, requiring number generation that was not possible with the traditional tools available.

The parti-number discussions lasted for two or three years and in that time we were privileged to have Robert enabling us to write up, publish and present our experiences through working papers, journals and conferences. His enthusiasm was overwhelming, to the point of getting a bunch of statisticians – who are in general not particularly good at writing (although some are good with numbers) – to write, debate and widen our understanding of generating statistics using participatory approaches.<sup>1</sup>

It is almost certain that, with our fixation on the technical details of the work and the urgency to deliver the research products for which we were contracted, we would have failed to identify the innovations that we were beginning to achieve. Without Robert’s support, who knows if we would have been aware of the importance of systematizing the methodological lessons of our experiences, and we would certainly have been oblivious to many of the exciting innovations made by our many colleagues around the world.

The parti-numbers group, and its concept, helped us to think carefully about what the integration of participatory approaches and statistical principles could achieve. This opened the debate about how the two could be combined; the trade-offs of such combinations; the gap that exists between people trained in different disciplines; the potential use of integration of methods; and the ethical dilemmas that are created when integrated methodologies are attempted in practice.

## CHAMPIONING PARTI-NUMBERS

The experience of the parti-numbers interaction was enriching and thought-provoking, and motivated a process of systematizing the principles for the integration of statistics and participatory approaches for research. For this I am grateful to Robert and the other members of the parti-numbers group. However, this does not seem to have stopped with the direct participants of our own small group; through my work advising about study design, the number of times that the term 'parti-numbers',<sup>2</sup> and the concepts behind, have been proposed as 'the methodology' to be adopted has been surprisingly large. The fact that the concept is being discovered and the experiences discussed and adopted by new generations of students, development workers, aid agency staff, international organization officers and grassroots organizations vindicates Robert's stubborn championing of the promotion of parti-numbers (Chambers, 2007a). In a truly participatory tradition, parti-numbers has opened spaces for populations to participate (albeit at different levels) in the production of numbers that will be used to make decisions that affect their lives.

Sometimes I am concerned about the technical details of studies that adopt an approach that combines statistical principles with participation and I am aware of the need to design them carefully. Challenges include sample sizes, introduction of biases, quality data assurance, the need for the use of appropriate analysis tools, artificial limits imposed on participation and the extraction of information. Those of us who have presented results of these combined approaches to unfamiliar or sceptical audiences have often been challenged, and from many sides. In my case, mostly from people who advocate the use of participatory approaches rather than from statisticians, although I am also aware that uses of participatory methodologies are often challenged from a statistical point of view. These are of course valid concerns, not only for studies that adopt a combined approach, but for all studies that attempt to generate information of good quality. Such challenges have been a positive driver for improving the integration of approaches concept and these are becoming more acceptable as one of the options for acquiring valid and reliable information.

Without the debate that took place inside and beyond the parti-numbers group, or Robert's unstoppable determination to tell everybody about the exciting opportunities that exist, build a community of practice and get us to share experiences, our task would have been much harder, more isolated and unlikely to have any effects that went beyond the generation of numbers, and corresponding challenges.

Working with partners in many countries, I have witnessed countless experiences of generating numbers using participatory approaches. I still see that, in many of those cases, the methodological innovations and results of those experiences remain local and are rarely known about beyond the users of the information.

Perhaps this is right and should not surprise anyone, since the main motive is to generate useful information, rather than to develop methodological innovations. What Robert and the parti-numbers concept has done for us is to break the barriers of geography, discipline, subject matter and time, by putting people in touch, promoting discussion and systematizing experiences. I am happy to see that it is also enriching and influencing new generations of people interested in participation, development and the generation of useful information. Parti-numbers has without doubt opened spaces for participation and enriched the way we think and work.

## NOTES

- 1 See Barahona and Levy (2007).
- 2 The term 'parti-numbers' seems to be used by some as a shorthand for numbers generated from a methodology that integrates statistical principles into participatory approaches, in doing so, borrowing the nickname of the discussion group to describe the approaches that were being discussed.

*Part 4*

# **Practising Development: New Professionalism**

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# The Personal and the Political

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*Ramesh Singh*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-26

## INTRODUCTION

It was in 1985, soon after joining ActionAid in The Gambia, that I came across Robert Chambers' book *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983). I had spent more than a decade doing front line work as a vocational agricultural teacher and agronomist. Like ActionAid, I was in the teenage years of my development career. At the time I came across Robert's work, not only ActionAid but the entire development sector believed that transfers from the countries of the northern and western hemispheres of resources (money) and technology (methods, tools and technology) were the way to bring about change and development. Agronomist-seed technologists such as myself still thought that improved seeds, tools and chemical inputs were our best weapons to defeat hunger and poverty. We thought that development was primarily about changes in place (locality and community) and physical qualities of life (such as houses, weights and heights of children). We were still a decade or more away from thinking and practices that would prioritize the transfer of power to girls, boys, women, men and the communities with whom we worked, and their human rights.

*Rural Development* was easy to read and understand, like much of what I have read of Robert's written works. The popularity of the book arose from what it had to say about us as individuals and institutions working in development. It held up the mirror to us and asked for personal or institutional behavioural change. We could all see a lot of ourselves in the things that the book was sharply critical about. Reading *Rural Development* challenged me, and many of my colleagues, more than anything else we had read before. We began to see and acknowledge our own biases, recognize the reality of seasonality in our work and behaviour and be conscious of the peripheries away from the road or abode of powerful people in villages. We

could recognize our rapid drives into and out of communities in the name of field visits as what Robert aptly called ‘development tourism’.

In this chapter, I reflect on encounters with Robert and his work, and on the impact that they have had at a personal level and on ActionAid as an organization. I look at the way in which Robert’s concern with biases and behaviour, and with power, came to influence the way in which ActionAid and its work evolved.

## CHANGING IDEAS, CHANGING PRACTICES

The call for change in *Rural Development* focused more on our biases and behaviour than on the power of the knowledge and action of the people and communities with whom we worked. We became acutely aware of those biases and behaviour, but it took much longer to translate this awareness into action and reality. This was due both to the absence of tools and techniques as well as the absence of role models. It was only in the early 1990s when the wave of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA)/Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)/Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) reached ActionAid that we found ways of translating our thinking into action. This coincided with the period in which we in ActionAid came into direct contact with Robert in person as trainer, facilitator and trustee of the board of ActionAid in the UK.

Although it started as a basket of participatory tools and techniques, RRA/PRA/PLA soon became ‘the’ philosophy in the way it affected our thinking, doing and being as development practitioners. Other people elsewhere in this book write about RRA/PRA/PLA in terms of methods, tools and techniques as well as about Robert’s role in developing and promoting methods or methodology (see Chapters 22–24 and 29). Here I emphasize the influence of participatory methodologies on the personal behaviour of development practitioners.

The results of RRA/PRA/PLA enriched our knowledge and made us more effective in our work. We learnt about the multidimensional nature, causes and effects of poverty and vulnerability. We learnt how poor people not only cope but also innovate and overcome difficulties that they face in their lives. We learnt about the differences and dynamics of power and poverty experienced by different groups of girls, boys, women and men. We learnt about power relationships and how they can affect poor people and communities both positively and negatively. However, it was the process of doing RRA/PRA/PLA that had the most profound behavioural impact on us as individuals and on ActionAid as an organization.

We learned about:

- Active listening so as to learn from others;
- Handing over the stick or pen so as to disempower ourselves and empower others;

- Using visual methods so as to share transparently and develop trust and accountability;
- Taking a transect walk to see and learn about the cross section;
- Accepting optimal ignorance and appropriate imprecision to ensure capturing what is important;
- Using pictures, sounds and diagrams in addition to, or rather than, written words so as to learn from others; and
- Utilizing the power of qualitative information to relate to reality.

At the core of the process of RRA-PRA-PLA were, Robert always stressed, the values of humility, respect and trust.

Any statement about the personal influence of Robert may risk incurring his serious displeasure. However, it would be dishonest not to acknowledge this personal dimension to the impact that Robert has had on development. His age, height, fitness regime and his self-deprecating personality make their initial impact, but the serious lasting impact comes from his ever-present humility, respect, responsiveness and support. He takes deep interest in other people and their ideas and experience. He responds to every yell or email. He constantly creates space and contact for others. I am not sure if any of us could even think of emulating Robert as a role model but I know many of us have tried to learn to be as positive and humble as he is.

## FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL

Robert is seemingly non-confrontational and appreciative of all ideas. However, we need only look at the titles and subtitles of his books to find the overtly political Robert – *Putting the Last First*, *Putting the First Last*, *Farmer First*, *Voices of the Poor*, *Challenging the Professions*, and so on. Robert takes sides.

It took well over a decade for the impact of *Rural Development* on us as individual practitioners in ActionAid to become overtly political. The route went from self-awareness regarding our biases and behaviours, to change in behaviours, to acknowledging, respecting and embracing the knowledge and action of poor people, to accepting the primacy of agency and actions of the poor people with whom we work. Robert's concept of the 'first' and 'last' finally got to us in the late 1990s. We began talking about 'transfer of power' beyond just 'transfer of resources' and 'transfer of technology'. It is the combination of PRA/PLA and Robert's own personal and institutional role, whether as Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) or ActionAid trustee, that influenced the power-political thinking and approach of many of us in and around ActionAid and of ActionAid itself.

ActionAid's human rights-based approach to development has roots in PRA/PLA. Venn diagram power analysis, social mapping and other ideas, tools and techniques at the core of PRA/PLA pushed us to think beyond the community of

locality to community of interest and identity. They directed us to move beyond the label of 'poor people' to individuals and communities as rights holders. Robert's concept of the first and last also helped us to develop the approach and politics of taking the side of poor and excluded rights holders. This politicization had a profound impact on what we do, how we do our work and who we work with.

Robert's other major political influence has been in orchestrating and legitimizing knowledge and actions from the field and of people and communities at the frontline of the fight against poverty and injustice. From boardroom to bureaucrat's office to academic classrooms, Robert has not only personally taken the stories of experience and actions of people and community from the field, but has also created space for the front line staff and communities to share their stories, challenges and progress. Legitimization of front line fieldwork in policy and decision-making has helped policy, advocacy and campaigning. In addition, Robert has passionately promoted the idea and practice of what is known as 'immersions' in which top policy-makers and decision-takers from bilateral and multilateral international organizations are persuaded to live in and experience the situation of people and communities in often remote villages in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

## OPENING SPACE AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

As an extension of this effort of bringing the centre and periphery together in a reverse power relationship, Robert has consistently argued for policy and practice changes within the international bilateral and multilateral development organizations. ActionAid had already decided that policy advocacy was an integral part of our work to bring about sustainable and structural changes towards eradicating poverty and injustice. But it was Robert's consistent influence at the board level that allowed us to gain momentum and depth in our policy advocacy work. He similarly opened up space for participatory methods in several bilateral development organizations in Europe.

Robert's most concrete influence in ActionAid has been in respect of our Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS, see Chapter 31). His persistent critique of, and even opposition to, the rigid logframe method of planning and monitoring helped us resist the domination of the logframe. ALPS had a liberating effect in the organization as it did away with baseline data, monitoring and evaluation systems and even the formal annual reporting system. Downward accountability to people, communities and front line staff was prioritized. Sets of principles, attitude and behaviours for better accountability were recommended. Reviews and reflections were preferred to evaluations and reporting. Decentralization was emphasized so as to release the time spent previously by front line workers in responding to demands of, and accountability to, head office. Although the organization has clawed back a formal annual report and is now designing a new monitoring and evaluation system, ALPS continues to remain a major political influence within ActionAid.

Perhaps the most important political influence that Robert has had is in facilitating people-to-people south–south and south–north networks of PRA/PLA practitioners and thus legitimizing and internationalizing practitioners and knowledge from the global south (see Chapters 23 and 29). There are so many of us in Africa, Asia and the Americas who have gained contacts, exposure and confidence through international workshops, training, conferences and consultancies that Robert leveraged for us. There are many national and regional networks of PRA/PLA practitioners across the world that Robert has inspired and supported. The Participation Group of IDS at Sussex where Robert works, and which took on the project of supporting growth and development of PRA/PLA networks, along with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (see Chapter 22), became the hub for ideas, contact, contributions and influence for us southern practitioners. This was enormously helpful even if it meant that many of the south–south contacts and networks were facilitated from the north.

## CONCLUSION

This is a personal reflection, but others in ActionAid to whom I talked share similar thoughts and experiences of Robert's contribution and influence on us and our organization. Robert himself may well deny some or all of this. But I for one can say that my thinking and work have been hugely influenced by Robert, as has been the thinking and work of ActionAid as an organization.

Writing this has been a useful reflection. As I delved into the nostalgia of participation, PRA/PLA and front line fieldwork, I realized how important they are even today. The modern-day focus on a rights-based approach seems sometimes to have drifted away from its powerful past of participation and PRA/PLA. Or is it that PRA/PLA has not been able to keep up with the new needs and pressures of the practitioners? Perhaps we have been so busy dealing with the expanded frontiers of trade, energy, climate change, governance, and so on, that we now have no time for the basics of participation, PRA/PLA and fieldwork. The new demands for efficiency, value for money and upward accountability are driving us in another new direction of tools and techniques of business plans, management information system (MIS), key performance indicators (KPIs) and suchlike. These can be useful but they are inherently antithetical to participation and political processes. We need a new and innovative wave of PRA/PLA that will respond to the challenges of our future work. Perhaps this book will trigger a new round!



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# Poverty Professionals and Poverty

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*Ravi Kanbur*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-27

*It would seem that it is we the professionals, the powerful and the influential, and those who attend roundtables and summits, who have to reconstruct our reality, to change as people.* (Chambers, 1995a, pp203–204)

Robert Chambers has had a profound influence on my thinking as a development professional. His 1995 paper, ‘Poverty and livelihoods: Whose reality counts?’ was an eye-opener for me. His constant reminder that the ‘realities of poor people are local, complex, diverse and dynamic’ (Chambers, 1995a, p173), and his pioneering of the methods of participatory poverty appraisal to bring out these realities, are major contributions to development studies. They certainly had an effect on this economist, well-schooled in the discipline’s deductive/empiricist/quantitative methods, with perhaps unthinking allegiance to its epistemology. I still remain a card-carrying economist, fully aware of the power and reach of my discipline and ready to defend it against ignorant or envious attacks by those who cannot understand it or master it. But the epistemological basis of my discipline, and its attendant weaknesses, are clearer to me now than they were when I first became a professional economist (Kanbur, 2002; Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007). Indeed, perhaps the greatest weakness of economists is that we do not fully understand the weaknesses of our discipline.

In all of this, Robert’s writings and his example have been my guides. There are others, of course. My interaction with the Exposure and Dialogue Programme (EDP), started by Karl Osner, and the inspirational example of Ela Bhatt and the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, have also been important. In recent years a group of us have engaged in the Cornell–SEWA–Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) dialogue process

– activists, sociologists, anthropologists and economists have met every 12–18 months to discuss differences of perspective on analytical and policy issues affecting the poor, preceded by an immersion and exposure to the realities of their lives.<sup>1</sup> These dialogues with Robert Chambers, Ela Bhatt, Karl Osner and others, some in person and some in the mind, have shaped the development professional I have become. I think a lot about how to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to poverty analysis, and how to bridge seemingly unbridgeable gaps between disciplines in the way that they approach and analyse development issues. How to get the ‘best of both worlds’ (Chambers, 2003b) from different perspectives is a constant concern of mine.

### DOING WELL OUT OF POVERTY: MORAL DILEMMAS

But there is one issue that remains, broached in their different ways by Robert, Ela Bhatt and Karl Osner. This issue makes me uncomfortable within myself, takes me off my high moral perch when I talk (or lecture) to others about poverty, and it is an issue for which I do not have an answer. It is quite simply this – those of us, including me, who analyse poverty and discourse about poverty, seem to do rather well out of it. Working on poverty issues, whether in international agencies, in bilateral donor ministries, in academia, in think tanks, in foundations, or in many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has become a well-defined career path, with ladders that one climbs and financial compensation to match. To be sure, the monetary compensation may not come close to that of the Wall Street Set or the Dalal Street Set. But the Development Set does fine, thank you very much. As Ross Coggins (1976) famously observed:

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

It is extraordinary how Coggins’ satirical poem resonates more than three decades later, and now surfaces frequently in the development blogosphere. Thus in the 4 December 2008 entry on his blog, ‘Owen Abroad: Thoughts from Owen in Africa’, Owen Barder invoked the poem when he wrote:

*I’m just back from the Doha Financing for Development Conference ... One topic that occupied the negotiators for hours was whether the UN, or another body such as the G-20, should host the next meeting about the financial crisis. (‘Thus guaranteeing continued good eating/By showing the need for another meeting.’) I estimated that the Financing for Development meeting cost about \$60 million ... I have made myself a personal promise. I do not want to travel around the world telling*

*poor countries what they should do and how they should change. I will concentrate on trying to persuade rich countries to change the policies and behaviours that make it difficult for the world's poor to share that prosperity.<sup>2</sup>*

For another blogger, Ponticulus Indica, the Development Set poem set off a bout of self-examination (perhaps self-flagellation) on 22 January 2010:

*Though I am certainly a misfit among the development set, no amount of dirt under my nails or parasites in my gut make me much better at the apparent level. Visa stamps fill my passport nearly to the end, and I am guilty of outlandish dichotomies likes proposing to my wife in luxurious Rome before jetting off to the hinterlands of rural Orissa. A casual observer (or one prone to prevarication) might comment that there was equal probability of my presence around Los Angeles or San Francisco on any given weekend, if I was not already off on some jaunt to Washington DC, NYC, or Seattle.<sup>3</sup>*

This issue is much deeper than the one I began with, on the dichotomy between economics and other disciplines, or between quantitative and qualitative approaches to poverty appraisal. This syndrome applies equally to pretty much all protagonists in any development debate. No matter how heated the debate, it usually takes place in salubrious surroundings (*In Sheraton Hotels in scattered nations/We damn multinational corporations*), and the professionalization and all that goes with it is clear on both sides of the table. My Cornell colleague, anthropologist Annelise Riles, has pointed to the strong similarities between the groups on either side of the table in these gatherings. Not only are they professionals, but in a strong sense they are indeed part of the same community, bound by 'a certain aesthetic of information of which the world of NGOs, nation states, international institutions, and networks is only one instantiation' (Riles, 2001, p2).

So, what are we to make of it from a moral, ethical perspective, this making of a (sometimes, very) good living at the World Bank while analysing poverty and recommending policies to alleviate poverty, or opposing supposedly wicked policies of the World Bank from a Washington, DC, activist group, but making a good living doing so just the same? The dilemma is not new, of course. The term 'champagne socialism' was invented for a reason – the well-to-do feeling good by arguing why the wealth should be taken away from them to help the less fortunate.<sup>4</sup> Or the Old Etonian George Orwell taking a trip to write about the north of England at the height of the depression in the 1930s, albeit that it produced a classic piece of literature in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Or, in modern times, Bill Gates spending away his billions on poverty reduction projects.

But in these cases, at least, the wealth came first and then the desire to reach out to the poor. And we can legitimately ask whether the philanthropy that it

generates is a good enough reason to allow wealth to build to such staggering levels (Dasgupta and Kanbur, 2009). What is striking about the class of poverty professionals (of whom I am one) is that the good living (granted, not at the billionaire or millionaire level, but pretty good nevertheless) is made through the very process of analysing, writing, recommending on poverty. To me, at least, this is discomfiting and disconcerting. I feel slightly ashamed within myself when I turn up to a poverty conference (perhaps even one where I am the keynote speaker), having flown business class, staying in an expensive hotel and (sometimes) being paid handsomely for attending. I recall many years ago, when I was in my 20s, telling the anthropologist Mary Douglas about how I was starting to do consulting for the World Bank on poverty issues and how important it was to do this work. 'And it's not too bad for one's own poverty either, is it?' came her worldly, knowing reply. The seeds of discomfort sown by that comment have germinated and taken root, and now will not let go.

I recognize, of course, the paradoxes of making so much of my discomfort, with the implication that others should feel it too. First, it seems to let off the hook those who make a good living without attempting to help the poor in any way. Surely the moral dilemma of living well in the midst of poverty is one that should apply equally to all and not particularly and peculiarly to poverty professionals? Why pick on those whose chosen profession is to help the poor, and berate them for doing well out of it? By suggesting that their pay and benefits should not be 'too high', does this not penalize the children of the poverty professionals for their parents' calling? Secondly, if highly skilled personnel are needed to attack poverty, then what is wrong with paying the market rate for that skill? Surely the alternative is that these skilled professionals will find equally well-paying jobs making widgets and the attack on poverty will lose its best troops? Surely, the poor deserve the very best talent to address their needs?

And yet my doubts and discomforts remain. Yes, living well amid poverty should be a dilemma for everyone. But am I wrong in thinking that it should be a problem particularly for those who live well out of attending meetings on poverty? At the very least the moral superiority that they (read I) might claim or feel because they work on poverty has to be tempered by the fact 'it's not too bad for one's own poverty, is it?' Second, the market-based arguments, leaving aside the delicious irony of market critics among the poverty professionals relying on it, depend on there actually being a market test. How many poverty professionals could really and truly get an equally well paying job in the private sector, say, even allowing for the specific human capital they have built up in the organization in which they work? This is an empirical question, of course, but I advance the hypothesis that pay among poverty professionals is better explained by distribution of economic rent than by a market process (or any process) that selects talent for poverty reduction and rewards it by results. There are, of course, individuals who have demonstrated that they could thrive in alternative settings, and have come to the calling of poverty reduction after achievements elsewhere. But as I noted

earlier, increasingly, in agencies, in academia, in think tanks, in foundations and in NGOs, poverty professionals are on a cradle-to-grave career path within an organization, or to use Annelise Riles's telling phrase, a network of organizations bound by 'a certain aesthetic of information.'

## EXPOSING PROFESSIONALS TO POVERTY: IMMERSIONS

So, what is to be done? There is no clean answer to the dilemma I have posed. Perhaps there is no answer at all. The tension resides in the very structures of operation, and the issue is perennial and perhaps primordial. Certainly, poverty professionals should not have to go around in sackcloth and ashes or disadvantage their children to retain the moral high ground. A certain, not excessive, amount of 'good living' on their part, even at conferences and summits, can be tolerated and is perhaps unavoidable. But a partial response to the dilemma can be fashioned out of the writings and example of Ela Bhatt, Robert Chambers and Karl Osner.

The first step has to be to recognize the problem and to discuss and debate its nature and dimensions. Robert, in the quote at the beginning of this essay and in his writings generally, has highlighted how the professional and the personal are inextricably intertwined. Even an organization such as SEWA, founded by Ela Bhatt with Gandhian principles as its bedrock, faces the problems of professionalization as it expands – the problems of demonstrated success in this case. It needs accountants, bankers, organizers, those who can communicate with donor agencies at their level, and so on. SEWA faces the problem that the professionals who it needs to help its poor members will have incomes and lifestyles very different from the members. And this was the problem that was identified in a very different context by Karl Osner – he noted the progressive disconnect between the thought processes of staff in the German aid agencies from the realities of the poor people they were meant to be helping. Osner began the EDP as a response to this disconnect. SEWA is a host organization for EDPs for agency officials but, equally important, it also does EDPs for its own professionals. Odd as it may seem, SEWA sends its professionals to experience, however briefly, the life of the poor members of SEWA, the very people the professionals are meant to help.

My specific proposal, therefore, is that each poverty professional should engage in an 'exposure' to poverty (also known as 'immersions') every 12–18 months. I do not mean by this rural sector missions for aid agency officials, nor the running of training workshops by NGO staff. What I mean is well captured by Eyben (2004); these are exercises that 'are designed for visitors to stay for a period of several days, living with their hosts as participants, as well as observers, in their daily lives. They are distinct from project monitoring or highly structured "red carpet" trips when officials make brief visits to a village or an urban slum' (Eyben, 2004, p2).

My own experience with the EDP has been moving, nourishing and intellectually stimulating and I recommend it as a personal goal for individuals and an

institutional goal for organizations. But I recognize, of course, that this is itself not problem-free. Here are some of the issues that have been raised when I have talked about and advocated the EDP to different audiences:

- Is this not just superficial exposure for a few days; is it not just ‘poverty tourism’? Yes, it is superficial in a fundamental sense because we get to come away from poverty after the exposure and the poor do not, but this is an odd reason to not do it at all – to keep the divide and to let it grow.
- Is this not a highly ‘extractive’ exercise? The poor hosts give their time and goodwill; the poverty professionals get another notch for their careers. The response is once again that those careers would go on with or without the exposure/immersion (as most poverty careers now do). The hope is that the personal and professional impact will be beneficial to the poor as the professionals go about their ‘normal’ work of analysis, formulation and implementation of interventions.
- Would the resources used for the exposure – for example, to fly the professionals to the site of the exposure – not be better used in helping the poor directly? Well, yes, but the real issue is perhaps the trade-off in using resources in this way versus using them for the next report for the shelf.

There is by now a fair amount written on immersions, synthesizing lessons from a range of experiences, and putting them in the context of a broader strategy of learning in development organizations.<sup>5</sup> But it is still a minority activity. How many poverty professionals can say that they have done such an exercise in the past 18 months? A fitting tribute to Robert’s legacy would be the regularization of immersions/exposures as a normal part of the poverty professional’s career.

## NOTES

- 1 For more information on WIEGO see [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org). A good account of the EDP is to be found in Osner (2004); See Bhatt (2004) for SEWA’s perspective on the Cornell–SEWA–WIEGO dialogue process; see also Kanbur (2009). The first compendium of write-ups from the Cornell–SEWA–WIEGO dialogue process is Chen et al (2004). The most recent compendium is Bali et al (2009).
- 2 [www.owen.org/blog/116](http://www.owen.org/blog/116), accessed 16 August 2010.
- 3 <http://rahulbrown.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/the-development-set-by-ross-coggins>, accessed 16 August 2010.
- 4 It was the 19th century philosopher Alexander Herzen who wrote ‘It is they, none other, who are dying of cold and hunger ... while you and I in our rooms on the first floor are chatting about socialism “over pastry and champagne”’ (Herzen, 1979).
- 5 See for example, Osner (2004), Eyben (2004), SEWA (2006), Chambers (2006b), ActionAid (2010), EDP (2010).

# Changing Attitudes and Behaviour

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*Sam Joseph*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-28

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter emphasises the importance of attitudes and behaviour in building systems of participation, or indeed destroying them. The chapter draws lessons from my experience over the last 20 years across Africa and Asia, where I have tried to use participatory tools and approaches for creating alternatives. I count it a privilege to have known Robert Chambers for these 20 years, as a colleague, mentor, inspiration and friend. Interacting with numerous people across the world, Robert's work in this period has been to develop and share ideas about participation and to pull together academics and practitioners in ways that have been unusual, creative and transformatory. My own role has been to develop working models of participation, applying some of these ideas on the ground in different places, from India to Somaliland to Rwanda.

## FROM THE DEVELOPMENT MANAGER TO THE PRA TRAINER

Starting in the late 1980s and stretching into the 1990s, new approaches to field-level learning became very important for practitioners such as myself. The suite of approaches was first named Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and later Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) (see Chapters 22 and 23).

My first meeting with Robert was during a village-based PRA exercise. I was immediately struck by one attitude in Robert: he listened to and encouraged others. This was a bit of shock for me. I had been trained to be a supervisor and manager of development: for me, procedure and compliance were all.

At that time, in the late 1980s, it was my responsibility to make annual plans for ActionAid India, and to ensure that those plans were executed in a timely and effective way. Like many others in the development industry, I was trained in strategic planning and multi-sectoral development, and in the methods of cost-benefit analysis and the logframe approach. We assessed impact in what we thought were rigorous ways: for example, through measuring change in literacy or weight-for-age or the nutrition of the under-fives. People who give money for development of course want to know how that money is spent – or so the fund-raising division told me. In our work, despite the high-sounding mission statements and project objectives, in the end we had to respond to the auditors and the accountants. For us development managers, the watchwords were always cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency. And of course we had to abide by the law; both the law in the donor country (of which there were many) and the law in our own ‘recipient’ country. In India, for example, if foreign funds are involved, there is a requirement to have either prior permission or a special registration, both of which require compliance. The organizational form that an aid organization selects also has an influence on how development is practised: different laws apply to a registered society, a cooperative, a trust or a not-for-profit organization.

Thus a good manager in an aid organization is supposed to ensure compliance to all of the above: organizational strategies and policies, financial procedures, legal compliance, employment laws and more. But what about the flexible, learning approaches that I had learned from Robert, where did this fit?

What did I learn from Robert? No blueprints. Encourage innovation. Let local people lead. Hand over the stick. Share power. Reverse the roles. Put people first. And above all, watch out for your biases, whether spatial (urban, tarmac, roadside), project (show pieces), personal (elite, male, user/adopter, active/present/living), dry season (no mud, floods, ice), diplomatic (politeness/timidity) and professional (time-bound, narrow and specialist). And for me, the bias of the development manager, heavily constrained by the legalistic audit culture of the aid industry.

Thanks to Robert’s encouragement, I began training others in participatory approaches and tools. I preached participation to all I met. But when I did my own quarterly organizational reports, I remained the ‘good manager’. It was a difficult balancing act and not very comfortable. Until I realized that participation is not just about field-level projects but about organizations and management. Participatory tools could be really useful for organizational imperatives, and help transform organizations to do development better. Peter Senge’s influential book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), describes five levels of visioning: telling, selling, co-opting, consulting and co-creating. At that time, most of my participation efforts then were in the tell, sell, co-opt and consult categories (remember I was trained to be a good manager).

I asked myself: is it possible to be a good manager in a large charity or aid organization, and at the same time provide leadership in participatory processes? At that time I did not know the answer. Only later was I able to realize the ambitions

of full participation, based on co-creation. My first steps came when I gave up my position as ActionAid Field Director in India and started a PRA unit for the organization that eventually, through the able efforts of others, became PRAXIS. This was an exciting time, with much energy and enthusiasm for new ideas and practices in India.

## **ACTION ON THE GROUND**

As others took on the challenge in India, I moved on in September 1993, away from my home country to somewhere very different, with new challenges: to Somaliland, again with ActionAid. Here I wanted to try and build a model that would demonstrate in practice what was often only talked about.

I discovered that, if participatory processes were to be encouraged, then both staff and the communities had to be protected from the multitude of restrictions and compliances that the development industry imposes. We had to avoid getting caught in the trap of development fads, and break out to create new ways of working that were legitimate, transparent and accountable, but above all fully participatory. I was lucky to have a highly supportive Regional Director, Colin Williams. Our reporting to the larger organization alternated between creative reports and development-speak. One of my main jobs was to protect both staff and communities from all the good ideas conceived by every subject specialist 'for the good of the Somali people'.

The result was that, on the ground, many of the things that I learnt from Robert actually happened. Blueprints were minimal; local people led and staff agreed, after some resistance, to hand over budgets to communities. Participation started between four clans that had been in armed conflict not so long ago. When reviews happened, they were done from separate viewpoints: community (men and women), institutional analysis (Ostrom, 1992), technical experts, finance and the ActionAid organizational perspective. Indeed much of the community aspect of the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) came from Somaliland (see Chapter 31).

## **PARTICIPATORY POVERTY ASSESSMENTS**

In the early 2000s, I got embroiled in the increasingly popular Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) processes for the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and I worked with PPAs for the 'Voices of the Poor' exercise initiated by the World Bank (see Chapter 8) in Somaliland.

This PPA was created by local communities; a big contrast to the standard practice where NGO staff led the exercise. There was a genuine attempt to hand over poverty assessment to local people, mostly nomadic herders. However, most

PPAs stopped at sharing power to generate action and focused only on creating information for others. There was little attention paid to creating the power to act by local people on poverty issues. The development rhetoric at that time talked about mobilizing civil society to hold governments to account. Yet there was very little effort invested in creating spaces for poor people and local communities to engage in problem-solving on their own. NGOs were often seen as the solution, being (apparently) ‘closer to the people’. Certainly, they honed their skills in questioning governments, but very often distanced themselves from government activities, creating project islands where participation was all the rage, but failing to work alongside government officials in equal participation for locally appropriate problem-solving.

In 2001, I was invited to Rwanda to work on the PPA. How could I help make this process work where others had failed? I was aware that substantive participation of local people depended on reducing the debilitating biases of normal development practice and handing over to local people. I recognized that all officials, both from government organizations and NGOs, came with a compliance list that had to be imposed (I had been there, and recognized the pathology). I knew that NGO workers had very short attention spans and they got moved either geographically or thematically. I had experienced the problem with the quick-result project mode, constrained by the LogFrame and meaningless impact and performance indicators. And I knew that local people had little or no input into the design of projects, and no opportunity for feedback and learning, because of the management systems, monitoring and evaluation protocols and audit requirements imposed by specialists with dubious qualifications. While I had learned all this, and my attitudes had transformed – released from the shackles of my training as a ‘good manager’ – could this affect real behaviour and shift practice on the ground?

In Rwanda, Vincent Karega, then responsible for the PRSP, agreed to both a consultative and a participatory approach. We had a team made up of Vincent, Fidele and Musoni (from the government of Rwanda), Karin (Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Fellow), Jeremy (European Union, EU), Gerard (UK Department for International Development, DFID) and Francis, Salifu, Colin and myself (from ActionAid). The participatory effort was named *Ubudehe*. It was based on the principle that local people must have the power and incentives to take action. Every *cellule* (village) was helped to engage in a collective action process to solve a local problem selected by local people with the promise of financial help of up to €900. The people of a *cellule* had to sign an agreement among themselves that had details of what was intended, where, how and the costs. This agreement in turn had to be signed by the local government authority to show that local government were aware of this collective action. A copy of this agreement was the proof for releasing money into the local account from the centre.

A hand-drawn map on a cloth (bedsheet size) was created showing each household. Local people identified poverty characteristics and identified such households on the map. But how to translate such rich, local information into

action? Much participation in the PRA mode stopped with the fine maps and participatory diagrams. This is not enough to vanquish poverty. In Rwanda, the PRSP team helped create collective action at the village level and also invited two poor households from each village to demonstrate how the poor can overcome poverty if they are given the opportunity to plan their household strategy and given assistance of less than US\$100 under the supervision of local elders. The EU agreed to fund first a pilot in one district and then later the whole country. An innovative funding procedure was put in place. Money would first come to the national bank, then it would be transferred to the local account of a *cellule* group when evidence of collective action was produced.

The EU has funded this national process twice, and in 2010 was planning a third round. This has been a very brave move for a large donor: it flies in the face of standard audit imperatives, and subverts the usual controlling hand of the aid agency. Roughly 15,000 collective action experiences for local people to engage in problem-solving on their own initiative have been supported on each occasion. In addition, there are up to around 60,000 stories of how individual poor households have used their own enterprise in coming out of poverty. The second PRSP has used *Ubudehe* as a fundamental reference for planning, and the process has provided a foundation for radical shifts in both attitudes, but critically also behaviour.

While attitudes can change through exposure and challenge, behaviour – rooted in bureaucratic routines, indoctrination from training, funding and audit protocols and so on – is much more difficult to shift. Changing the funding dynamic – and so the relationship between local communities and aid funding by creating power-to-act through local institutional design, has been critical in this transformation in Rwanda, as it was before in Somaliland.

There are also important legacies from such participatory processes, where attitudes and behaviour are challenged. The original team has now dispersed. Francis no longer works on the national effort and focuses on small projects, while Fidele in government continues alone. Vincent and Musoni continue as ministers in the Rwandan government. And the rest of us connected to aid donors or NGOs are (mostly) no longer even in the country. Yet, the foundations that were laid created the experience of problem-solving for local people and that, according to recent reports, certainly lives on. In many *cellules*, the long dormant potential, both individual and collective, has been released, in ever increasing enterprise. *Ubudehe* was awarded the United Nations (UN) Public Service Award 2008 for Africa.

It is usually good to end on a positive story. But it is also important to sound words of caution. The positive dynamic unleashed in Somaliland and Rwanda, and in many parts of India, through creative, collaborative processes of participatory co-creation are always under threat. New ways of thinking and doing can easily unravel. New imperatives from hierarchical organizations can impose old frameworks that stultify and constrain with great ease. Even originally radical and emancipatory approaches, such as ALPS, can turn out to be undermining in the wrong hands. A few years ago, for example, an ALPS review team from outside

Somaliland recommended that Somaliland does not conform to the organizational blueprint of ActionAid and therefore should be required to comply. As a result, the shared power model of participatory management was replaced by a standard hierarchical command-and-control model.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Attitudes and behaviour stem from beliefs and values. They are also influenced by incentives, procedures, protocols and organizational forms. In travelling the road that Robert marked out, I now have a richer understanding of participation. But it is worth offering a warning to fellow travellers: following such approaches can land you in trouble. You could lose your job (I lost mine in 2002 but continued to support Rwanda as a volunteer till 2008) or you could lose your funding!

Based on my 40 years of learning, here are five important lessons:

- 1 Build autonomous spaces for local people to take part in problem-solving. As Vincent Ostrom has argued: 'The autonomy of the open public realm is of basic importance in establishing self-governing capabilities that exist in the society itself. Because of this autonomy, individuals can function first as their own governors and then in establishing a variety of institutional arrangements that function as self-governing arrangements, without prior authorization, licensure, or tutelage by governmental (or NGO) authorities as such' (Ostrom, 1994, p206). Power is not the only currency of relationships; trust and reciprocity build relationships.
- 2 Use systems thinking. The use of the LogFrame has handicapped many people, and pushed complex systems into linear. Instead, think in circles, links and feedback loops. Think in dynamic terms, not in single time slices. Design adaptive systems that respond to complexity, and so bury the LogFrame!
- 3 Avoid double-speak. Use specific words. Language is the only medium that humans have to communicate ideas. If a word has multiple meanings then how do you communicate? Is there a common understanding of the words empowerment, participation, sustainability, equity and gender? Of course not. Yet these words are included in most funding proposals. As words become popularized and captured – such as participation – it is important to recognize the innocent and fraudulent use of terms. Focus instead on the underlying meanings: autonomy, justice, self-governance.
- 4 Understand the theory behind a development initiative. Theory is not just for academics; practitioners must engage too. Ideas of participation are rooted in thinking on systems (autopoiesis), institutional design and democracy. We must engage with these concepts, defining the citizen as sovereign and avoiding the naïveties of approaches and frameworks, so common in the world of development.

- 5 Learn the principles of good accounting, and so the real meaning of accountability: to people, not to bureaucrats. Design simple accounting procedures that stand up to the tyranny of the audit culture that so ties the hands of development workers. Consider, for example, thinking of change across decades, not the annual plan and budget. But what about impact, you ask? From a systems point of view, feedback takes time to travel through the variables of a complex and dynamic system, therefore local people should be in feedback loops and control action.

Let me end with a final quote from Vincent Ostrom that captures the challenges ahead. Robert has started us on this journey, but there is a long way yet to travel:

*There is a sense in which democracies, as ways of life, cannot be taught by recourse to ideas alone. Instead, democracies as ways of life are brought to realisation by learning to live and work with others in ways that are commensurate with self responsibility, impartiality, respect for the autonomous authority of others, contestability as a route to conflict resolution through mutual enlightenment, the shaping of common knowledge, mutual understanding, and trust in patterns of associated relationships that reach out in larger communities of relationships. These foundations give meaning to democratic ways of life. (Ostrom, 1997, p60)*



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# Networking: Building a Global Movement for PRA and other Participatory Methods

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*Samuel Musembi Musyoki*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-29

## INTRODUCTION

I have known Robert Chambers for more than 15 years. As an anthropology student at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya, I had neither come across his work nor had I heard about Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). I had not even seen or read his famous book, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983). I only came to learn about his work much later as I began to grapple with how to work with communities in Kenya as a development worker. As the small local NGO I worked for was funded through Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), I had been inducted to Ziel Orientierte Projekt Planung (Goal-Oriented Project Planning, ZOPP), the German version of Logical Framework Analysis. I began simplifying ZOPP to make it more suitable for working with communities in Kenya. Community Oriented Project Planning (COPP) became the name for our simplified version of ZOPP. In my search for more practical participatory methodologies to work with communities, I came across literature on PRA and developed an interest in Robert's work. I later had an opportunity to work with him at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), where I was the networking and capacity-building coordinator from 2001 to 2007. My work with Robert focused on promoting and deepening understanding of participation and participatory methods through linking practitioners from around the globe to share experiences and learn from one another.

In this chapter I share my insights on Robert's role in promoting networking and capacity building, and in the promotion and spread of PRA. This chapter appreciates the significant contribution he has made in initiating and supporting

the growth of a global network of PRA practitioners. Through his networking initiatives, pathways of participation have moved PRA beyond its simple application in development projects to embrace a plurality of participatory approaches that seek to influence greater social change. Robert has been a major player, from the early experiments of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in the 1970s, to the relaxed PRA in the late 1980s, to Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) in the 1990s. He has seen the uses of PRA/PLA diversify from natural resource management, to participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and engagement in policy analysis and now in human rights advocacy. Today uses of PRA/PLA are as many as the users. This chapter draws on my personal experience and work with Robert, in Kenya and as a colleague. It brings out my reflections and by no means does it exhaust the contribution Robert has made in the promoting of participatory approaches in his long career. As I write this article, I am working with him and other colleagues in Plan Kenya and the East and South African Region where we are part of a global network of practitioners promoting Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS, see Chapter 19).

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

I met Robert for the first time in 1996, at a workshop organized by the Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya (PAMFORK) to share experiences on the range of participatory methods in use in Kenya. I had just joined PAMFORK. The workshop brought together about 70 practitioners from around the country. I had been trained in PRA the previous year and had been combining PRA with participatory education theatre and aspects of the logical framework (using tools such as the problem tree and objectives tree) to facilitate grassroots communities through situation analysis and planning. The encounter with Robert introduced me to new ways of looking at PRA to challenge the institutional, professional and personal behaviour and practices.

It was around this time Robert had come up with the phrase ‘whose reality counts?’, which later became the title of one of his best-selling books (Chambers, 1997b). I still remember the tattered flip charts, pictures and diagrams he used to take us through what I would say was a very sophisticated gallery walk. Later I offered to help him when he was folding up but he declined the offer. I realized that he had a specific way he wanted them folded and arranged, I guess for ease in tracing them for the next meeting. The images and messages remain very clear in my mind. I admired his ability to facilitate learning with huge numbers of people. While I had been trained to ensure that I capped my list of participants at 25, from my interactions with Robert this conventional wisdom was challenged and today I facilitate sharing and learning with huge groups ranging from 100 to 300 people.

The workshop was called, ‘Values and skills in participatory approaches: What binds us’. Robert was amazed or even shocked at the numerous labels of

participatory methods the Kenyan practitioners had come up with. I remember we counted more than 500 different labels. Everyone was doing something and calling it a brand of PRA. However, when he stood to talk he looked at what bound us together. Although the names were many, as he pointed out, what stood out for him were the underpinning principles of attitudes and behaviour they had in common. To him it did not matter that we had so many labels for the participatory methods we used. When he talked of PRA/PLA being a growing family of approaches, then we all found a space in that family. He also knew he was here to help build a network or movement of participatory methodologies and practitioners that would help in the spread of methods that have a huge implication on how development institutions engage with those perceived to be powerless, and getting them to influence decisions that impact on their lives.

Robert has a way of motivating and inspiring people to appreciate their contributions and making them aspire to do much more and to realize their full potential. He started his talk by stating how astonished he was at the way PRA had spread so far and so fast since it started in the late 1980s. As you know, Kenya and India were its main birthplaces. So, he said, Kenyans can justifiably take pride in what has happened. With this, he helped us to find a place as pioneers in the history of PRA, thus spurring our desire/interest to become part of a growing global movement of participatory methodologies practitioners. In fact, it was through interactions with him in this workshop that I learned the term PRA was first used in Kenya in 1988 in Machakos, in eastern Kenya. I could perfectly identify with this, as the place is not so far from my ancestral homeland. I have wondered if Robert was trying to tell us that this thing called PRA is not foreign to us and we should reclaim it. PRA, which was by then in at least 100 countries, had started and moved from the south to the north and sometimes had been introduced to north by trainers from the south, Robert told us. He went further to state that the people from the north had been lucky to have the time and the resources to write about it and unfortunately many had come to assume it was a northern innovation. All I could hear at the back of my mind as Robert went through his sharing was: it is yours, be part of it, claim it and use it, document it and share it with others.

### **SOUTH–SOUTH SHARING: BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK**

As I was to learn later, such gatherings were taking place in other countries and resulted in networks just like the one in Kenya. These included the Nepal Participatory Approaches Network (NEPAN), the Nigerian PRA Network (NIPRANET), the PRA Network in Tanzania, the Uganda Participatory Development Network and the Bangladesh PRA Network. In India there was no such network although there were many NGOs and individual PRA practitioners who were part of a more diffuse network of PRA practitioners. PRAXIS, which came out of the ActionAid India

training unit, remains one of the largest promoters of PRA networking through their biannual PRA thematic workshops, which Robert has not missed since they began. These practitioners' networks, as I learned later, were a very important strategy for the spread of PRA and were also mechanisms for facilitating reflections and learning to ensure good practice of participatory methods. Robert was very passionate about them and always knew what to say to unite rather than divide the practitioners. He traversed Africa – covering Kenya, South Africa, Botswana, Tanzania, Nigeria and Namibia – and, as I learned, he was equally engaged in Asia (for example, Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and also Latin America, with Bolivia being the main hub.

At that time, there were about 25 PRA networks around the globe. PAMFORK, founded in 1994, was one of the oldest. Robert had been on a mission, inspiring the earlier generation of PRA practitioners he had encountered. He had seen the need to link people and organizations he had met. He would not rest until all the nodes were connected, travelling around to meet PRA practitioners, hold PRA clinics, sell his ideas on the need for networking, and leave behind the most important resource: sources and contacts for PRA. This link became much easier as people in the global south got access to email. Before then Robert was very diligent in writing letters to the contacts he had established. While at IDS and with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) I had the opportunity to work with Robert and other colleagues to organize more south–south face-to-face networking workshops, learning exchange visits and to convene visiting fellowships. It was always a joy to see how Robert created time and spent time with the Fellow. He always made sure that he invited them for dinner in his house. This provided an opportunity to interact with them more and to hear more about what they were doing. The Fellows were always delighted to meet with Robert and appreciated how he encouraged them.

Through the initiative of Robert, and with funding from SDC and the Swedish government, these networks grew from isolated groups of individual PRA practitioners to credible centres for promoting sharing and learning on participatory approaches to development. How did Robert achieve this?

From a very tiny cramped office surrounded by huge piles of paper and with only a skeleton staff, Robert kept active communication with all the PRA contacts he had made across the globe. He took an interest in them and in the incredible work they were doing and wrote them personal letters of encouragement. This way, Robert built genuine friendships, which attracted people to work towards a shared goal. From this tiny office he was able to organize a series of south–south sharing workshops, which were held at IDS, Asia, Africa and Latin America. These brought together individual practitioners from the PRA network, finding their shared interest – participation, participatory methods and the need to promote their use and bring them to the centre of development. The south–south sharing

workshops fuelled a shared desire to promote good PRA practice but also to influence mainstream development agencies to do development differently.

These workshops culminated in an idea of forming a larger network drawing membership from all the PRA networks: Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA), which became a reality in 1997–1998 (see [www.rcpla.org](http://www.rcpla.org)). The RCPLA were to be spaces where people converged to share, reflect and document their experiences with participatory approaches. These were vital in providing an opportunity for documenting PRA experiences by practitioners from the south that, at the time, was lacking. The RCPLA were key in providing grey literature direct from practitioners, which was facilitated by resource centres hosted by the IDS Participation Group and by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). IDS and IIED were the only northern-based institutions to become members of the RCPLA. Through IDS, IIED and in collaboration with about 14 members of RCPLA in Latin America, Asia and Africa, the network became bigger and more regional and global south–south and south–north networking events were organized and documented.

## SOURCES AND CONTACTS

The one thing Robert has always done is to take the contact details of people whom he felt were doing commendable participatory work. These contacts would end up in a global list of PRA sources and contacts – basically a list of contacts for PRA practitioners from different parts of the world. This list still exists as a database in the Participation Resource Centre (PRC) at IDS. It was an important tool for linking people and organizations interested in PRA work around the globe. On his international trips, he would make a printout of the sources and contacts and share it with those interested in linking up with PRA practitioners in their regions. This is a practice he encouraged all the RCPLA members to do – keeping a database of PRA practitioners in their respective countries and regions. He would occasionally write letters to find out what was happening or update them on what was happening.

Adding practitioners' names in the sources and contacts list not only provided them with the opportunity to be networked with institutions and individuals interested in PRA, but also profiled them as credible practitioners. This way they would become key PRA point persons in their countries and regions. At some point I remember asking Robert how sure he was that these people measured to his expectations – basically I got him to reflect on what would happen if these people were taken up by some agencies to train or to undertake some PRA assignment and they turned out not to perform well. From then on Robert became more wary as to who he added to the list, as not all he added were necessarily as good as he thought.

The other thing Robert used to do, and still does, was to ensure that all PRA practitioners subscribed to receive *RRA/PLA Notes*. Robert has recruited more subscribers to this journal than anyone else I know. The journal is as old as PRA. It

was started way back in 1988 by IIED (see Chapter 22). It remains one of the most popular and important periodicals for people interested in participatory approaches to development. According to Robert, for participation he knows of no other periodical in the world that compares with it. The journal began as a scrapbook where practitioners would share their field notes and diagrams and these would be published and shared with very minimal or no editing. This journal has been one of the most important devices used by Robert to facilitate networking and sharing information among practitioners. It became the must-read resource for all the RCPLA resource centres. I remember when Robert visited PAMFORK and the other RCPLA resources centres, the first thing he would do was to check if they had the latest edition of *PLA Notes*. When he found that they were missing he would communicate with the IIED team to ensure they were dispatched immediately. The journal was and still is distributed free of charge to southern-based institutions and individual practitioners. Back issues are now downloadable free of charge at [www.planotes.org/backissues.html](http://www.planotes.org/backissues.html). Robert is a member of the editorial board and has authored many articles in *RRA/PLA Notes* that anyone interested in reading his earlier works would find interesting.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Robert's personal approach and passion has encouraged and inspired many PRA practitioners and thus contributed to the rapid global spread of PRA. The excitement with which he appreciated the early generation of PRA practitioners – facilitators and trainers – was magical at unlocking their energy. This gave them the passion and commitment to become PRA 'champions'. Most of them joined the evolving national and international network of practitioners. The direct and regular communication that Robert maintained made PRA practitioners feel valued, their work appreciated and legitimized. By supporting practitioners through convening and facilitating face-to-face networking and sharing workshops, he created spaces for peer learning, inspiring them to come up with new innovations. He always appreciated the little things and encouraged people to try more new ideas and become blacksmiths of their own PRA tools. His slogan 'use your best judgement at all times' and the blank PRA handbook (see Chapter 24) enabled people not to rely on manuals but rather try new ideas.

His extraordinary energy, generosity of ideas and enthusiasm to meet and work with new people was and still is so much part of the reason that he is such a formidable networker. His ability to build and maintain relationships at a personal level by sending postcards, letters and emails means a lot to those he networks with. I have countless postcards from Robert and they all have a message of encouragement and greetings to my family. He cared not just about me and the PRA work that I did, but also about my family life. We have had long conversations about Kenya's history, politics, wildlife, mountain, rock climbing and how to

combat open defecation in Africa and arrest diarrhoeal diseases. I have never met anyone else who anywhere approaches his ability to take an interest in other people and give them his unbridled and quite genuine encouragement. Through working with him I have learned and grown in my ways of relating and working with people.



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# Institutional Learning and Change

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-30

## CHANGING INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Robert Chambers was the intellectual author of institutional learning and change in international agricultural research, advocating that centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) should become more effective at learning from poor farmers and responding to their needs in order to become better learning organizations. Thanks to Robert's unflagging support between 2003 and the present, the idea of institutional learning and change eventually developed into a fully fledged and funded Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) initiative that is poised to be institutionalized in the CGIAR reform process (Watts and Horton, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Consistent with his low-key approach and self-deprecating manner, Robert describes himself not as a central member of the ILAC group, but as someone who 'lurks on the fringes'. However, as this appreciation demonstrates, Robert was a persistent and crucial driving force behind the ILAC Initiative and he should be recognized for any success that it has achieved. Besides his intellectual contributions, Robert has been a supportive friend and colleague who has helped sustain the individuals associated with ILAC as they faced challenges in moving forward with an agenda for change.

The idea for ILAC originated in work of many people, but it started to come together during a conference convened by CIMMYT (the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre) and the CGIAR Standing Panel on Impact Assessment, in Costa Rica in February 2002, to address the question 'Why hasn't impact assessment made more of a difference?'. A number of participants highlighted the need for innovative evaluation approaches that went beyond answering 'what?' and 'how much?', questions to provide information also on

the whys and hows of agricultural innovation (Watts et al, 2003). During the conference Robert called for a more realistic analysis of the factors affecting the lives of the poor and the contribution of research to improving their livelihoods. A number of papers from the conference were subsequently published in a special edition of *Agricultural Systems*, in which Robert concluded that 'to be serious about poverty, the national and international research and development community has to be serious about institutional learning and change' (Chambers, 2003a).

Beginning several years before the Costa Rica conference, a series of studies were undertaken by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) on behalf of the CGIAR and the Science Council, to assess the impact of international agricultural research on poverty alleviation. These were the first major impact studies to employ a livelihoods framework, rather than focusing solely on estimating changes in agricultural production or incomes (Adato and Meinzen-Dick, 2002). A broader range of important questions were asked in these studies in order to gain a more complete understanding of the impacts of agricultural research and development and how to achieve them. The approach was instrumental in introducing a broader approach to impact assessment in CGIAR. Robert served as a technical advisor to the project; his work was fundamental to the development of the livelihoods concept (see Chapter 10). Writing about poor, rural households, he said:

*They maintain a portfolio of activities. Different members of the family seek and find different sources of food, fuel, animal fodder, cash and support in different ways in different places at different times of the year. Their living is improvised and sustained through their livelihood capabilities, through tangible assets in the form of stores and resources, and through intangible assets in the form of claims and access.*  
(Chambers, 1997b, p163)

The IFPRI/CGIAR impact assessments attempted to assess the multiple interactions between technologies and the vulnerability of households, their asset base, intervening institutions and livelihood strategies. A livelihoods approach implies attention to culture, power and history, as well as the implications of gender, ethnicity, class or other types of social differentiation, in order to understand the role of agricultural research on the lives of the poor. The approach made impact assessment more difficult, but it aimed to create a more complete understanding of how technologies can complement complex livelihood strategies of the poor (Meinzen-Dick et al, 2003).

In the preface to the *Agricultural Systems* special edition, which offered alternative methods for impact assessment, Robert challenged not just the methodology but the objectives and approach underlying impact assessment:

*ILAC implies continuous learning and unlearning in place of one-shot ex post evaluation; learning from what does not work as well as from what does; acknowledging, managing and moderating asymmetrical power relationships, emphasizing broader and more equitable relationships; involving the full range of stakeholders, not least poor farmers; and relating to farmers' complex, diverse and risk-prone realities. (Chambers, 2003a, p120)*

Robert participated in a key meeting convened by IFPRI in snowy Washington, DC, in 2003 to discuss the role of institutional learning and change in CGIAR. It became clear during the meeting that neither IFPRI nor the CGIAR Science Council would continue to pursue the development of the concept into a practical initiative, however, a group of participants agreed to develop the idea and investigate its practical implications, with a focus primarily on evaluation practice in agricultural research. The Rockefeller Foundation offered to provide seed money if the group could develop a viable funding proposal. Robert provided encouragement and intellectual leadership at the Washington meeting, and encouraged people to be patient with institutional learning and change as a loosely defined concept so that the idea could incubate and develop, as demonstrated in the following quote:

*It may be a good thing that [ILAC] is not currently explicitly defined, but is a conjuncture of words – Institutional, Learning, Change. Sustainable livelihoods began like this, as two words put together which then many people developed meanings for. This had the advantage that people defined and owned the evolving concepts. The same could happen with ILAC in the CGIAR system.<sup>2</sup>*

Robert participated actively as a co-author of the first paper (Watts et al, 2003) to explore the topic of institutional learning and change in agricultural research for development. He encouraged the co-authors to develop more fully, discussions about organizational learning that goes beyond the Kolb's stages of individual learning (Kolb, 1984) and to include explicit mention of relationships – negotiation, collaboration, networking, sharing, mutual support, reciprocities, interpersonal interactions of many sorts and learning from experiences with these.

These ideas contributed to the development (within the first major ILAC Initiative grant, funded by the Dutch government) of a training programme on facilitating participatory decision-making, which was seen as a core skill needed for a new way of carrying out impact assessment and evaluation. To date, the course has trained more than 200 staff and managers in CGIAR and partner organizations in new skills for collaborative thinking and working.

## FRAMEWORKS FOR DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Another example of Robert's leadership during the development of ILAC was the simple, yet crucial, distinction he made between traditional and proposed frameworks for development practice. This framework presented in Table 30.1 was presented by Robert to a gathering of the Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) staff to introduce the ILAC concept. Key concepts included a bottom-up, participatory people-centred approach. Learning approaches are continuous within the dynamic and unpredictable environment of the poor agricultural household. The role of the evaluator is more of a facilitator than external appraiser, and critical self-reflection is a valued behaviour. Although the main objective of the presentation was to build support for a grant to ILAC from IFAD (who eventually did provide a major grant), much of the discussion at the meeting focused on issues related to learning and change within IFAD itself. The ILAC idea was so powerful that when it was presented, the host organization immediately saw the relevance and were eager to discuss learning and change within their own organization.

At a subsequent planning meeting at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Cali, Colombia, it was suggested that ILAC be merged with another CGIAR programme. Robert argued strongly that ILAC should remain separate in order to pursue its learning and change mission. He presented a broad vision for ILAC not focused on technologies or tools, whether from information or knowledge management or any other domain, but encompassed the wider processes of innovation, facilitation, learning and change. In spite of the difference of opinion and his own strong feelings, he nevertheless managed to create a positive atmosphere with his humour and enthusiasm, at one point getting down on the floor energetically with sheets of flip chart paper taped together to create a gigantic matrix of learning and change activities to which participants from all sides of the debate could add their inputs.

When the team was developing the proposal that led to one of ILAC's major grants, Robert strongly argued against over-planning the project and suggested that the proposal, eventually funded by the Dutch government, include a budget item for 'unanticipated opportunities' that could be left unspecified. This helped the project remain nimble and able to react to changing circumstances and take advantage of emerging events. It was also a practical example of how, even within the constraints of donor-grantee relationships, there was room for the unanticipated and the unknown to be explored in the interest of learning and change.

## CONTINUOUS SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

In spite of his very busy schedule, Robert continued to keep up with ILAC and participate where possible in ILAC events. At the first planning meeting of the

**Table 30.1** *Frameworks for development practice: Shifts and expanded options*

	From	Expanded to include
Paradigm of and for:	Products	People
Orientation and power:	Top-down	Bottom-up
Key words:	Planning	Participation
Modes / approaches:	Standardized	Diverse
	Linear	Complex
	Reductionist	Systems
Conditions:	Controlled	Uncontrolled (able)
	Stable	Dynamic
	Predictable	Unpredictable
Research mode:	Experimental	Constructivist
Learning:	<i>Ex post</i>	Continuous
Roles:	Teacher	Facilitator
	Supervisor	Coach
	External evaluator	Evaluation facilitator
Outcomes:	Products and infrastructure	Processes and capability
Valued behaviours:	Rigorous/ objective	Critical self-reflection
Dominant professions:	Agricultural scientists and economists	All
Patterns of change:	Predetermined prescriptive	Evolutionary
Characteristic management tools:	Logframes and external review	Action research, participatory review and reflection
Main purpose of evaluation:	Accountability and control	Learning and improvement
Accountability to:	Donors and peers	All stakeholders, especially the poor
Vision of capacity development:	Build capacity of others	Develop own capacity
Treatment of failure:	Buried or punished	Valued as learning opportunity
Consequences of failure:	Cataclysmic	Continuous programme readjustment

ILAC Learning Laboratory in Cali, Colombia, in 2007, and more recently in the workshop on Inclusive Partnerships in Agricultural Research for Development organized by ILAC and the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) in preparation for the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development, Robert submitted video and audio contributions, which can be seen on the ILAC website ([www.cgiar-ilac.org](http://www.cgiar-ilac.org)). His presence in these events furthermore inspired participants and helped them stay focused on the critical need behind the events – to ensure that research is as relevant as possible to the lives of poor farmers.

At ILAC's suggestion Robert was invited to serve as a panellist on impact assessment methodologies at the 2009 conference<sup>3</sup> with several other experts, who were arguing for different approaches to impact assessment. When it came Robert's turn to speak, he rose above the methodological debate to remind the audience that impact assessment does not, in and of itself, solve the problems of the poor. In fact, a lot of impact assessments have already been done and a large amount of public

funding has been invested in them. He implored the participants to remember that the first question we should ask is ‘do we really need another impact assessment, or might we have put the money that would have gone to impact assessment to another use that would have a more direct contribution to improving the lives of the poor?’ If more impact assessment really is needed, the discussion should focus around the questions of key concern to the poor farmers.

These comments were greeted by hearty applause by the audience, who had been caught in the middle of the methodological tug of war. Even though Robert was in great demand during the conference, he took time to meet to discuss the current situation with the ILAC Initiative and to provide advice on strategic engagement with the CGIAR change process. Robert also gave a lot of encouragement on a personal level to the ILAC change agents, staff and collaborators, recognizing the toll that being at the forefront of an institutional change process takes on the individual.

### **FACILITATING CULTURAL CHANGE IN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT**

The future of ILAC in the new CGIAR seems to be more secure, since a recent mid-term review of the initiative found that most people interviewed (more than 30 leaders in CGIAR and other partners of ILAC) believed that ILAC has an important role to play in the future (ILAC, 2009). CGIAR Change documents also highlight the need for cultural change in CGIAR, to enable scientists, managers and others in the system to work together and also to be more responsive to the needs of partners and the ultimate clients of CGIAR, the smallholder poor farmers whose livelihoods CGIAR aims to improve (CGIAR, 2008).

ILAC can help contribute to this cultural change by providing tools and approaches to work better in partnership. Obstacles will certainly continue to challenge the introduction of this concept. Beliefs and traditions that position CGIAR and other advanced research institutes as ‘centres of excellence’, the generally declining investment in agricultural research and increased competition among institutes for funding, and the historical linkage between impact assessment and public awareness and fund-raising continue to haunt and impede efforts to reform (Horton and Mackay, 2003). The next few years will tell whether this rhetoric can become a reality, but certainly the progress that has been made and any future successes in helping to reform CGIAR would not have been possible without Robert’s vision and leadership.

## NOTES

- 1 [www.cgiar-ilac.org](http://www.cgiar-ilac.org), accessed 19 August 2010.
- 2 [http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/52539/2/ILAC\\_Working\\_Paper\\_No1\\_Summary\\_Workshop.pdf](http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/52539/2/ILAC_Working_Paper_No1_Summary_Workshop.pdf), accessed 1 December 2010
- 3 The conference was held in Cairo and was jointly organized by the African Evaluation Association, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) and the Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation (NONIE), 'Perspectives on impact evaluation: Approaches to assessing development effectiveness' 29 March–2 April 2009, [www.afrea.org/content/index.cfm?navID=5&itemID=855](http://www.afrea.org/content/index.cfm?navID=5&itemID=855), accessed 9 September 2010.



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# Participation, Learning and Accountability: The Role of the Activist Academic

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-31

Energy, optimism and a ‘can do’ attitude are needed in development. All too often the bureaucratic nature of systems, processes and linear thinking seem to squash both principles and people out of the development process. Reductionism reduces complex realities into boxes and people become the objects of development of (well-intentioned) others rather than key actors in their own development processes. Robert Chambers and his belief that development processes can be better and can be based on an endogenous model that encourages poor people to determine what change is relevant in their own communities and be the drivers of that change has long been an inspiration for many. This chapter reflects on how Robert’s engagement helped shape ActionAid’s approach to impact assessment.

## **NEW TIMES, NEW APPROACHES**

At the end of the 1990s, ActionAid was embarking upon a process of change. With a new, inspiring chief executive, a compelling organizational strategy and new leaders throughout the organization, changes were afoot. At the time, the two of us had been recruited into ActionAid’s Impact Assessment Unit (IAU). Rosalind had emerged, slightly jaded, from previous non-governmental organization (NGO) experience questioning whether NGOs could ever live up to their rhetoric and Antonella had returned from a sabbatical. Both of us saw the opportunity to engage in the kind of development we could be proud of, and to re-engage with ideals

that had, in part, been inspired by Robert's work on 'putting the last first' – of development being a process of supporting men and women to have more choices, control and justice in their lives rather than being the recipients of Westerners' benevolence. Indeed, the IAU, along with others in ActionAid, wanted to narrow the gap between the 'rhetoric' and the 'reality' of development. As an organization we wanted to 'walk the talk' and live up to the principles espoused in our new organizational strategy 'Fighting Poverty Together'.

'Fighting Poverty Together' was radical. It articulated a new direction. In essence, it refocused the organization's work from delivering services 'to others' to addressing the fundamental causes of social injustice and poverty 'with others'. From being a slightly cautious British charity, ActionAid was now to link with others to reinforce global anti-poverty, social justice work. Far greater emphasis was to be given to policy and advocacy work across the world and working with local partners. It was clear that internal systems had to change. The most obvious system requiring revision was the internal Accountability, Planning and Reporting System (APRS).

During the mid-1990s, ActionAid, like many of its peers, equated accountability with upward reporting with centralized systems. The instruction manuals were long, the thinking inherently linear. The assumption was that certain activities lead to certain outcomes that bring about positive change. Both ActionAid staff and local partners were frustrated. Everyone was complaining about spending excessive time on project planning, monitoring and reporting. Paradoxically, ActionAid was known for its pioneering work on participation, yet values of involvement had not permeated internal systems. While considerable staff effort was spent on reporting, the organization knew little about its lasting effects in people's lives. Excluded people were rarely involved in defining their own change processes, monitoring ongoing initiatives, nor evaluating development outcomes.

## CHANGING SYSTEMS

It is not easy to change organizational systems – let alone those of large international agencies. Everyone is affected and everyone has an opinion. Initial attempts to rethink the internal APRS became mired in confusion and struggle to retain power. Key issues were how much decision-making power ought to be retained in the UK and how much 'upward reporting' was required to satisfy the information requirements of donors, sponsors and supporters. In the midst of this confusion, Robert became a key protagonist. As a highly regarded, long-term ActionAid trustee he injected a passion and drive to cut through development bureaucracy. He challenged us to try something new. Spurred on by false starts, months of wasted deliberation and costly consultants' failures, the new chief executive encouraged the head of impact assessment to meet up with Robert and think afresh. The 'stick' was handed over.

No more encouragement was needed. In early 2000, on bits of flip chart paper strewn on Robert's Institute of Development Studies (IDS) office floor, hastily scrawled diagrams subverted the 'normal development professional paradigm'. The aim was to produce a system that, instead of feeding insatiable desires for information in the north, fostered primary accountability to the people whose lives are affected by development, encouraging them to influence their own development processes and ensuring that learning with, and from, primary stakeholders constantly improves development practice. A few months later a small team – including Robert – met in Zimbabwe to work up the new ideas. Together we were to devise a workable system that would bring organizational processes in line with the values and principles of the organization: a system that would facilitate rather than hinder good development practice.

We were all encouraged by Robert to push boundaries. To ask ourselves honestly: Why did we do what we did? In whose interests were we acting? How much reporting did we really need to see in London? How could decision-making be placed firmly in the hands of people closest to the development context? How could the people, in whose name we raise money, really become the key drivers of their own development process? Moreover, how we could make things simpler and less bureaucratic? The resultant ALPS system has been written about elsewhere (David and Owusu, 2001; Scott-Villers, 2002; Chapman et al, 2003; David and Mancini, 2004; Owusu, 2004; David et al, 2006). In summary, it had three quintessential elements that rendered it controversial.

Firstly, the system emphasized the principles that drive development work – transparency, participation, learning, awareness of gender and power and, above all, accountability to primary stakeholders – recognizing that principles are more important than functional planning and reporting. Secondly, ALPS recognized that social development, rights and justice can not be planned for, managed and delivered in a linear fashion. To carry out 'Fighting Poverty Together', ActionAid needed to create the space for staff to reflect and work in different ways with partners and the excluded people. This would allow space for partners and staff to respond appropriately to changing situations and contexts and for ActionAid to become a reflective and reflexive organization. While many international NGOs and bilateral agencies have responded to the demands of greater accountability by increasing reporting to central offices, ALPS tried to do the opposite. It tried to reduce the numbers of reports coming to London and to emphasize instead greater accountability to the community groups and partners with whom ActionAid worked.

## **SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICE: INTRODUCING ALPS**

Though the core elements of ALPS were similar to many other international NGO accountability systems, two key elements were new, and at the time, innovative. The first was the introduction of annual participatory review and reflection processes

(PRRPs). The aim was to involve stakeholders – particularly the excluded, but also partners, donors and peers – in the analysis of what had worked and what had not. By opening itself up to criticism and creating the space for honest dialogue regarding programme expenditure, plans and initiatives, ActionAid hoped to create the possibility for stakeholders to be honest themselves and to actively influence the organization's agenda.

The second was the decision not to require a formal annual report from country programmes. Instead, country directors were asked (in the spirit of organizational learning) to share rough notes from the review and reflection processes, putting lessons and outcomes on the ActionAid intranet. Robert's participation in the dialogue around all these elements was key. He challenged us to work in ways that cast aside normal professional hierarchies and to seek to empower front line staff and partners with the space and remit to work in the ways that made sense to them in their rapidly changing contexts.

In June 2000, ALPS was officially launched. At the time, ActionAid's chief executive wrote: 'We are all aware that it is much easier to change the system than changing behaviours and practice.'<sup>1</sup> He was right. The organization had so much to learn, a metaphorical mountain to climb.<sup>2</sup> Living up to the principles of ALPS had ramifications for everything we did. It required a political shift of consciousness across the whole of the organization. We began to learn on the job, making mistakes and blunders, but where there was strong in-country leadership, good development practice also flourished.

Some country directors had fought long and hard against organizational bureaucracy. These people welcomed ALPS. For them, the involvement of partners and community groups in all that they did was already important. ALPS gave permission to push boundaries – to extend and formalize participatory processes of accountability and to break new ground in increasing transparency. At the other end of the scale, some country programmes floundered. Country directors were struggling to maintain large service delivery programmes, which had no place for, let alone understanding of, ideas of accountability to and learning from the people they called 'beneficiaries'.

Robert's involvement was important at all levels. At the senior management and trustee level, he provided credibility and confidence. To middle-level management, he provided encouragement in the form of emails, papers and supportive encouragement of even minor changes and successes. And at the practical level, he learnt with us as the organization tried to navigate its ways through the mass of contradictions and challenges that ALPS inevitably threw up.

## GRAPPLING WITH POWER

While ALPS highlighted attitudes and behaviours, learning, accountability and power, what this meant in practice at all levels had not been fully explored.

Dilemmas arose around the strength of ActionAid's organizational strategy versus local level plans; ActionAid's power as a donor vis-à-vis its partners; the inevitable power politics that plays out in communities; and gender-based politics that pervades communities and institutions.

In 2001, a workshop was held in Bangladesh on power and power relations. It proved pivotal. Action Aid people and partners from more than 20 countries took part, including the Chief Executive, the directors of policy and Asia and one trustee, Robert Chambers. The workshop had a deep personal impact. We had gone to share experiences around participatory methodologies. Instead, we underwent an experiential process, which challenged us to become much more aware of institutional power, professional power and personal power and of the need to change our own behaviour. For Robert, 'the experience was both traumatic and transformative' (Chambers, 2006b), 'and very much on an ALPS wavelength'.<sup>3</sup> As an institution, we were challenged to look inwards – at our own personal experiences of power and at power relations within our organization – in order to identify contradictions and develop new lenses, sensitive to power, with which to see our work with our partners, our allies and, crucially, with excluded people. This was not an exercise in political correctness. For Robert, the concept of power and the 'congruence between the personal, the professional and institutional' has emerged as an important theme in his work. From it has emerged his engagement with the potential for participatory methodologies as an entry point to transform power and relationships and to challenge powerful people in aid agencies, NGOs and other institutions to reflect and change (Chambers, 2005a, 2006b).

## CREATING RIPPLES IN AN AGE OF RESULTS

It takes a long time to create change on a large scale. It requires trust, effort, focus and will. It also takes unwavering commitment and visionary leadership from those in power. The story of how ALPS has changed ActionAid's practice is still being played out. The discussion on accountability takes new twists and turns as ideas and practices develop. The introduction of ALPS inevitably caused a ripple effect through the international NGO community. Interest, critical acclaim and then, unsurprisingly, those who wanted to expose it as flawed.

Whatever its lasting influence, ALPS has contributed to the ongoing debate and development of practice. The last decade has witnessed an increased focus on NGO accountability to primary stakeholders and experimentation with participatory approaches that address issues of power, justice and rights and open up new frontiers of enquiry, learning and understanding of change (Earl, 2004; *PLA Notes*, 2005–2009; Beardon and Newman, 2009). It has been interesting to note that annual reflection processes (albeit many of them different from ActionAid's) are now a feature of many international NGOs and indeed some bilateral aid programs.

For all the positive shifts over the past ten years, countervailing forces to change both within organizations and in the external environment are very strong. The pull for 'routinization' is powerful. For many international NGOs, the drive to explore how primary stakeholders could become more central actors in their own development process has been marginalized by growing pressures for upward accountability. The rise of results-based management in bilateral and multilateral agencies and the drive to show results to northern politicians and public has inevitably influenced international NGOs who rely on bilateral/multilateral funding.

The big elephant in the room is the imperative for institutional growth, with large international NGOs driven to work in more countries and sectors. The values and attitudes of the private sector seem to influence boardroom discussions. A culture of target setting and upward performance management has become dominant. Unfortunately the way the debate is being framed ignores much that has been learned over the years about the non-linear nature of change, the importance of reflexive learning and good practices from participatory learning, monitoring and evaluation (Wallace and Chapman, 2004; Reeler, 2007; Guijt, 2008). This undermines the importance of understanding and building on local needs and contexts, of addressing power and gender inequities and working in a way that supports local people to respond appropriately to their changing context.

Despite the rise of results-based management, the development of practice in the south continues to unfold. Work around accountability to stakeholders, learning, power, participation and participatory monitoring is developing and changing. More needs to be done to highlight and share more widely the ideas and better practice that is emerging from this. The 'strengths-based approach', which works in a holistic, practical and adaptive way to encourage primary stakeholders to address their own priority issues is a case in point (Roche, 2009). There are a growing number of initiatives that have emerged that are seeking to develop better accountability to communities. For example, Oxfam Australia and Oxfam New Zealand have developed processes and mechanisms to encourage greater accountability to their partners and through them to primary stakeholders. These include complaints mechanisms, annual reflection processes, stakeholder surveys and processes for the transparent sharing of international NGO analysis and feedback with stakeholders (Roche et al, 2005; Roche, 2007; Oxfam New Zealand, 2009). These and other initiatives are a tribute to Robert's inspiration and clear articulation of the values behind these approaches.

Robert's work continues to inspire people to push boundaries and innovate. Most of all though, it inspires people to adhere to principles of good practice: principles that keep people at the centre of their own development process.

## NOTES

- 1 Salil Shetty, Introduction to ALPS (Action Aid, 2000).
- 2 Robert took an active, if not major, role in devising the ALPS acronym. He was pleased to get an acronym that represented the heights that needed to be scaled.
- 3 Email correspondence with Antonella Mancini, 2008.



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# Development Professionalism

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*Norman Uphoff*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-32

## **A NEW PROFESSIONALISM**

A bright, shining thread of concern has run across Robert Chambers' many decades of engagement with development theory and practice – the multiple roles of development professionals and the varying manifestations, for better or so often for worse, of development professionalism. This concern was in many ways the obverse of Robert's involvement in participatory modes of development, the subject that I will also address.

Robert's concern with the orientation and performance of development professionals gave impetus, as well as cogency and urgency, to his early efforts to understand and improve irrigation management in India, Sri Lanka, Kenya and elsewhere (see Chapters 16 and 17). The expectation that irrigation engineers and technicians would provide sufficient, timely water deliveries to farmers was so often assumed but unmet that the attitudes, values and skills of these development professionals – and particularly their relationships with the public that they are supposed to be serving – became a frequent focus of Robert's musings and exhortations.

The pervasive contradiction between 'ideal' and 'actual', with regard to professionals' performance had evident and unfortunate consequences in the real world, especially for the poor and disadvantaged. Robert's concepts of 'last' and 'first' applied a fortiori to government professionals who are supposed to be assisting 'the last', but so often do not, for a plethora of institutional, personal, cultural, political and other factors.

Robert's early thoughts on 'rural development tourism', based on observations in East Africa and South Asia, called attention to the superficiality and blind spots of so many professionals' engagement with their presumed clienteles (Chambers,

1981a). His thinking evolved into a more full-fledged critique by the time he wrote his major book on rural development, provocatively subtitled *Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983). This work provided a manifesto for reforming and redirecting development professionals of all disciplines and ranks. It was followed by an even more pointed and discomfiting sequel, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b), which suggested ways to proceed with this desirable social transformation that David Korten and I had earlier characterized, somewhat euphemistically, as 'bureaucratic reorientation' (Korten and Uphoff, 1981).

Robert's writings have been read by some as a warranted put-down of development professionals, with the inference that we should instead transfer our hopes to rural people, pursuing bottom-up strategies for rural development. However, I and others have understood them as *cri de coeur* to resurrect our original ideals and expectations for development professionals, promoting what Robert called 'a new professionalism'. Unalloyed bottom-up strategies have not been more often successful or sustainable than their counterpart, purely top-down efforts.

### **FROM BLUEPRINTS TO LEARNING: FROM BENEFICIARIES TO PARTNERS**

What has been learned, if anything, in the years since Robert first put this matter forcefully on the agenda of development agencies and professionals is the need for collaborative rather than simply 'participatory' approaches. Success and sustainability are more likely if rural residents, professionals with various qualifications, local administrators, researchers and many others all contribute to joint efforts in complementary ways, according to their respective comparative advantages. This approach, blurring boundaries of responsibility and authority, is gradually superseding the classic 'division of labour' model with its hierarchical mode of operation that was more appropriate, if ever, in previous centuries.

This is where the theme of community participation and local organization in Robert's work intersects with his advice and admonitions about development professionalism. For professionals to be effective in their diagnoses and recommendations for rural development broadly conceived, they need the evaluations, criteria, ideas, suggestions and assumption of responsibility at local levels that can produce well-suited innovations that are effective, efficient and sustainable.

This approach to development interventions – which Korten seminally characterized as a 'learning process' approach (Korten, 1980) – has been slow to take root in the protocols and practices of agencies. The contrasting 'blueprint' approach remains, unfortunately, dominant, exemplified by the 'logical frameworks' (logframes) of USAID and Ziel Orientierte Projekt Planung (Goal-Oriented Project Planning, ZOPP) of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ).

Still, compared to the situation that prevailed in the 1980s when 'learning process' ideas were first advanced by Korten (1980), Chambers (1983), Uphoff

(1992), Rondinelli (1993) and others, the context in which development initiatives are now planned and implemented is more hospitable to participatory modes of operation than when earlier constructs of 'development administration' framed decision-making and management.

The leadership, persistence and incisiveness with which Robert promoted the methodology of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (see Chapters 22 and 23) was an operational link between the reorientation of development professionals and the promotion of community interests, knowledge and participation in development programmes.

The assumptions and beliefs upon which development professionals have based their asserted authority and control are multiple and complex. Their claim for priority was due not just to ignorance about local situations, constraints, opportunities and capabilities; there are many economic, political, social, cognitive, cultural and other considerations that were woven into a protective mental armour around the privileges and preferences of professionals. There were, however, pervasive gaps in what development professionals knew about the lives and contexts of the public that they were supposed to be benefiting.

PRA proved, in many cases if not all, to be an effective 'armour-piercing' weapon for getting professionals to understand local needs and opportunities better and, most importantly, to foster a respect for what community residents know and are already doing for themselves. PRA was generally understood as something beneficial for local people, giving them an opportunity to express their ideas and priorities, but its most important contribution to rural development was, I think, the impact that it had, or could have, on professionals' thinking and on their relationships with the communities that they are expected to assist.

Robert and I both detested and objected to the term 'beneficiaries', which development agencies routinely and gratuitously bestowed on communities. This term may have been thought to be progressive by making 'benefits' the defining characteristic of development activities. However, this self-congratulatory term implied condescendingly that development professionals were the sources of any and all improvements, and that the people's role was to be more passive than active – receiving, cooperating and complying, rather than planning, deciding and accomplishing.

Adding the adjective 'intended' to the noun 'beneficiaries' made clearer that the aspiration to benefit rural people is not always or necessarily achieved; rural people can 'participate' in harmful effects, not just benefits (Cohen and Uphoff, 1980). Yet the noun itself also remains problematic, and a logical extension of Robert's thinking and writing is for us all to move beyond the concept of 'beneficiaries' and to regard and treat rural people as 'partners' in development.

This requires a significant change in professionals' understanding of their roles and their expertise in the development enterprise. PRA, along with the promotion of respect for 'indigenous knowledge' and 'traditional knowledge' (Warren et al, 1992), gave significant impetus for such change. However, the logic of PRA

insights and concerns, which had grown out of a prior engagement with rapid rural appraisal (Chambers, 1981b), led in turn to a recasting of PRA in terms of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), paralleling the movement, which is still incomplete, of shifting discourse from the concept of beneficiaries to that of partners.

### PUTTING THE LAST FIRST

Robert's call for development professionals to put the last first was an explosive challenge that was still reverberating when he upped the ante by proposing that the first should be put last. Not surprisingly, this recommendation has gained less acceptance and traction among development professionals than the prior proposal. Putting the last first is easier to endorse than the radical reversal of putting the first last.

Perhaps this recommendation should not have been taken literally, as it is in many ways more rhetorical than realistic. The logic of a participatory approach points towards a model of horizontal rather than vertical division of labour, proposing a strategy of collaboration rather than just that of participation, as suggested above. In the work on participatory development done under the auspices of the Rural Development Committee at Cornell University, our assessments of rural development experience and successes in Asia concluded that 'the populist fallacy' has limitations that paralleled and probably matched those of 'the paternalist fallacy' (Uphoff and Esman, 1974). At that time, the paternalistic presumption was tacitly influencing almost all of development planning and most development professionals.

There was a widespread assumption that knowledge and expertise, and indeed wisdom and virtue, were to be found among development professionals. They had a predominance, if not a monopoly, on these assets that presumably entitled them to privilege their thinking and conclusions in crafting and carrying out development efforts. The contrary assumption, which began gaining allegiance in the 1970s and then accelerated in the 1980s, was that knowledge, wisdom and virtue were to be found, by contrast, among rural people.

Top-down approaches to development were justifiably criticized and deprecated as the participatory movement gained momentum. Yet neither Robert nor I was enamoured with the converse bottom-up strategies that were championed from the 1980s, as they became a new kind of conventional wisdom. Anyone who works on a sustained basis in rural areas knows that rural residents are not really so different from other populations in terms of their personal qualities and capabilities. Their local knowledge may compensate for having less formal knowledge, but still, they have no more monopoly on wisdom and virtue than anyone else. Participatory approaches taken to any extreme have their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities,

which are not necessarily more acceptable than the problems that arise with more technocratic or bureaucratic modes of operation.

'Putting the last first' is not by itself a solvent for removing the many impediments to rural development, and 'putting the first last' should not be invoked to derogate all the more-educated and privileged role players in development, literally putting them at the beck and call of communities, without rights or recourse of their own.

Some have read this into *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997b), but I read it as proposing the desirability and possibility of a profound and permanent levelling of the playing field in development efforts. This field is currently tilted, counterproductively, to the advantage of people with higher economic, political and/or social status. People with unchecked power and privilege generally tend to exploit this advantage and to ignore the ideas, interests and needs of other people, whenever either top-down or bottom-up strategies are pursued as pure types. Either approach taken to its logical extremes can produce its own pathological consequences.

## CHANGING CONTEXTS FOR PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

This conclusion does not mean that bureaucratic and participatory strategies are equally or always valid. The latter have more to commend them in both practical and ethical terms. The current shift toward a world in which popular and majoritarian interests have more weight, reflects the general democratization of world culture and national social systems that has occurred during the span of Robert's professional career. It also reflects the much higher levels of education found within rural communities and their rapidly growing access to information and opportunities through modern electronic means of communication and information dissemination.

Rural communities now, with access to the internet and to email, are dramatically different from those three and four decades ago, when Robert and I first became engaged with rural development. I could not have imagined back then that I would now be receiving email messages at Cornell University from NGOs and smallholder farmers on the other side of the world, reporting on their experiences with the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) that preoccupies me these days, and with digital photographs attached! Some even report their data in Microsoft Excel. Participation has thus become a different phenomenon with such an evolution.

Over the last decade, much of the domain of rural development has changed: social relations have become more egalitarian; institutional 'gate-keeping' has been undercut by the internet; and newer generations are much more educated (and technically savvy). This has transformed the potentials for participation in important ways.

## BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Robert has been a role model for me in my work with SRI, which more and more people know about around the world.<sup>1</sup> When he first started working on PRA, rigorously focusing his efforts and deflecting other claims on his time and attention, I was one of the most frustrated. This meant he was withdrawing from battles that we had been engaged in to promote participatory irrigation management in India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and elsewhere. I did my best to get him to re-enlist in this campaign, but he was resolute; he saw the potential leverage that PRA methodology could give for both improving rural development planning and evaluation and for redressing the imbalances and inequalities that were keeping rural people 'in their place'.

When I similarly saw the potentials that SRI changes in crop management could have for rural people, as well as for consumers and for environmental quality, I appreciated that Robert's single-mindedness had been necessary to build both critical mass and durable momentum, enlisting others in the effort so that it could, over a decade, acquire legs for its own spread. Accordingly, I resolved to do the same for what is now an international movement that is beyond anyone's control, or even purview, as it morphs into improvement strategies for other crops, including wheat, finger millet (*ragi*), sugarcane and even teff.

What we have seen in country after country is the emergence of heterogeneous networks of people, literally from all walks of life, who share an interest in raising agricultural productivity while reducing agriculture's negative footprint on the environment. They want to help benefit poorer and marginalized households and to engage farmer interests and imagination in further improving and extending the original SRI ideas for agroecological innovation. Ministers, farmers, professors, NGO workers, journalists, retired teachers, youths, all kinds of persons have begun interacting, rubbing shoulders and getting their feet muddy in ways that are quite different from how agricultural research and extension were conceived and carried out when Robert and I began our respective careers working on rural development.

Robert's ideas and initiatives have contributed to this transition, but it is not yet a transformation because 'bureaucratic reorientation' and 'new professionalism' are still incomplete. Our SRI experience is showing that the intellectual and ethical climate for promoting rural development has considerably changed. We are still doing battle with some of the old professionalism, but it is losing ground and respect; in the case of agricultural research, by its unreasonable and empirically ungrounded resistance, the opposition to SRI is discrediting itself, contributing to a faster transition.

Those of us concerned with participatory development need to recognize that these trends are ongoing and that our expectations, distilled from past experience, need be continually revised. The question to be grappled with in the decades ahead is neither how to put the last first, nor how to put the first last; rather, it is how

to establish authentic, diverse, horizontal partnerships between both first and last, and everyone in between.

## NOTE

- 1 <http://ciifad.cornell.edu/sri>, accessed 8 August 2010.



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## Appreciation and Reflections

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*Robert Chambers*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003298632-33

It has been a delight to be reminded by this book of good experiences with friends, the excitements of discovering things together, the shared moments of 'ahha!', and the folly and fun of forgotten misdemeanours. These have been good times and I have been exceptionally fortunate to have had, and still to have, such wonderful collaborators, fellow explorers and friends. However, let me balance the picture with some of what has not been said. I will limit this to my earlier days in development, to mistakes made then and to my mindset, though there is plenty more that I could say about these in my more recent days too.

Two mistakes were disastrous. Both were in Kenya. The first was the grazing schemes I was involved in introducing in Samburu District, where I knew Paul Spencer. Paul knew they would not last. He warned us in the district administration but we did not want to hear. We knew we were right. We knew the Samburu were destroying their environment. They and their environment had to be saved, and we knew how. It was the arrogance of well-meaning ignorance and power, ignorance in my case heightened by having bypassed the normal year's training before taking up the job.

The second disaster was my management of the evaluation of the Kenya government's Special Rural Development Scheme. Neither David Leonard nor Jon Moris knew as much about what happened as I did. My approach was top-down, insensitive and politically naïve. I dismissed critiques, ignored suggestions for an advisory group, and built up a little empire with staff, vehicles and an excess of typewriters. This generated such justified criticism and resentment that an evaluation was set up to evaluate the evaluation. I ran away. We decamped as a family to a rural retreat where I took refuge in writing and rock climbing. As at other times, when faced with conflict and unpleasantness, I did not fight but fled.

Then there was my administrator's mindset and values. My experience as a District Officer formed and framed how I saw things. Jon Moris startled and shocked me, when we were editing the Mwea book, by pointing out that I always sided with the management of the scheme, and supported the management against the settlers. I denied this and resisted the insight: but it was accurate. Then, when he and Jane Hanger found that women were disempowered and often worse off in the scheme, I undervalued their work: but their chapter on women has been far more widely cited and more influential than anything else that came out of the Mwea studies. My managerial view carried over into research on canal irrigation in South Asia where the solutions I proposed were through top-down controls, failing to see that the future lay with more participation and control by irrigators. My mindset changed but slowly: and it was a long time before I recognized the importance of self-critical reflection.

That said, my strong emotion is gratitude. I thank Andrea and Ian for the idea of the book and overcoming my reluctance, for their vision and imagination and the great amount of work they have put into it; and for conceiving it as an opportunity for others to be critical, to reflect on their own contributions, and to review the changing contexts of development. To the contributors, I am so grateful for the time and effort they have given to this, and for writing so engagingly and interestingly from their own experiences, ideas and insights. Above all I thank my family. Little of this would have been possible without them: Jenny has been a wonderful source of ideas and so often right when I was wrong; much has been hatched with her and come from our conversations. She and our children have travelled and lived where my nomadism took me and where I wanted to be, disrupting her career and making the children change schools. Much of what is recounted in this book has been for my work at their cost.

There is gratitude too, and almost disbelief, at how lucky I have been. The privilege of working with those who have written this book is so self-evident that I will not labour it: I have gained and learnt so much from them, and they and others have been so significant in the changes they describe. Their contributions have been much more than comes across in the modesty of their recollections and analysis, and there is generous overattribution to me. Then, as Andrea and Ian have recorded in their introduction, there is the extraordinary freedom that I have had. As Richard Jolly recounts, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in its early days encouraged Fellows to spend time abroad – in my case in Kenya, Botswana, Sri Lanka, India (three times), and in Geneva with the office of the UN High Commissioner (UNHCR). In the research in India and Sri Lanka with Barbara Harriss-White and John Harriss, I was free to switch from studying agricultural extension and research to the emerging and enthralling subject of water management. In IDS with Richard Longhurst, a two-page memo gave us the funds for the first Seasonality Conference. In the Ford Foundation in Delhi, Roberto Lenton gave me wide latitude to travel and pursue interests, including wandering around with Tushaar Shah. Thanks to Gordon Conway, Rosalind

Eyben and Charles Clift I could be in India, funded with a legitimate base and the flexibility of an open script, at the time when much of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was being invented by Indian colleagues, as Parmesh and Meera Kaul Shah, Sam Joseph and Kamal Kar record. And on return to the UK there was funding that allowed open-ended collaboration with International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), as John Thompson and Irene Guijt note, and networking with people like Sammy Musyoki. These were the exhilarating days before logframes and results-based indicators, when the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) allowed a budget item for 'unforeseen opportunities', as Jamie Watts notes and also managed later to achieve for the International Learning and Change (ILAC) initiative.

No one now can expect the same sequence of freedoms I have had: as a District Officer, as a trainer of administrators, as a researcher in Kenya and in South Asia, as an evaluation officer in UNHCR, and as an IDS Fellow in an era of state funding and allowed to live and work elsewhere without risking my appointment. Learning that I am not a manager was painful, for others perhaps more than me; but it was also a liberation, allowing me to be free as a nomad.

The conclusion, though, must not be nostalgia. Looking forward there are grounds for optimism. New spaces and opportunities continuously open up. Change in almost every domain and dimension accelerates. Communications are ever more open. Participatory methodologies that liberate proliferate and present a potent point of entry for professional, institutional and personal change. The sheer logic and necessities of turbulent complexity can hardly fail to loosen the current tightening of procedures and upward accountability. Supporting that loosening, the contributors show how vital flexibility and freedom have been for us, and always will be for those who work in development. We are all different and do different things in different ways. We can celebrate our diversity. We find meaning, fulfilment and fun in varied ways. Let me hope then that in the future many others will enjoy something like the freedoms and good fortune that I, and many of the contributors, have had.

So a central lesson to draw from this book is for development professionals to strive to give one another space, freedom and trust. May many more in many roles be given and seize space to explore, adapt and innovate. And may making and using such spaces be seen as a guiding principle for development, for good change.



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# Appendix: List of Robert Chambers' Publications

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Many of the following publications are available in the Robert Chambers archive at  
[www.ids.ac.uk/go/robertchambers](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/robertchambers)

## 2011

'Foreword' in S. Devereux, R. Sabates-Wheeler and R. Longhurst (eds) *Seasonality, Rural Livelihoods and Development*, Earthscan, London

## 2010

*Provocations for Development*, Practical Action Publishing, Rugby, UK

'A revolution whose time has come? The win-win of quantitative participatory approaches and methods', *IDS Bulletin*, vol 41, no 6, pp45–55

'Paradigms, poverty and adaptive pluralism', *IDS Working Paper 344*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton

## 2009

'Going to scale with Community-led Total Sanitation: Reflections on experience, issues and ways forward', *IDS Practice Paper 1*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton

'Beyond subsidies: Triggering a revolution in rural sanitation', *Focus Policy Briefing 10*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton (with P. Bongartz and inputs from K. Kar)

'Towards a new social justice agenda: Understanding political responses to crises', *IDS InFocus Policy Briefing 11/5*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton (with N. Hossain, K. Bishop, K. Carroll, R. Eyben, R. Jolly, C. Melamed and R. Sabates-Wheeler)

*Handbook on Community-Led Total Sanitation*, Plan UK and Institute of Development Studies, Brighton (with K. Kar)

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