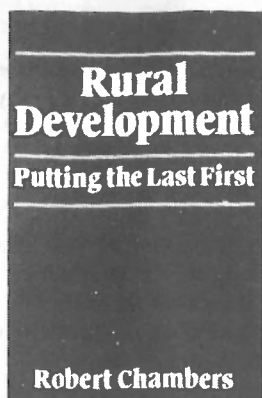


# No need for development martyrs?

## Reflections on 'putting the last first'

a discussion with Robert Chambers



For more than a decade, Robert Chambers has been an advocate of those rural people in the Third World – a majority, he would suggest – whose poverty is invisible and who are 'the last' of this book's title. In 1978 he explored, together with colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex and the Ross Institute, how seasonal factors in many parts of the world combine to intensify rural poverty and at the same time to conceal this poverty from outside observers.<sup>1</sup> Then in 1978 and 1980 came working papers on the concept of 'rapid rural appraisal', proposing an approach to rural planning and extension which would offset the biases of perception which have in the past influenced many rural development initiatives.<sup>2</sup> This work has generated expressions which now have wide currency among rural development workers: 'survey slavery', 'tarmac bias', 'rural development tourism'.

*Rural Development – Putting the Last First* draws together much of Chambers' thinking of the past years. Although he is generous in his acknowledgement to colleagues who have influenced him, the book carries the author's own hallmarks of clarity in layout and writing and of a very lively style. He says in his preface that he has 'not been able to resist, despite good advice, occasionally having fun with language' and the book is all the richer for this. Chapter 5, for example, is entitled 'Integrated Rural Poverty'; no three words could better introduce the very important analysis which follows of the way in which various types of disadvantage (physical weakness, isolation, poverty, vulnerability to contingencies and powerlessness) 'cluster' and interlock in poor households, to result in a 'deprivation trap'.

This chapter marks, in effect, the turning point of the book; statement and analysis of a series of problems occupies the first five chapters, while the final three chapters offer some proposals which may correct the biases of the past and, the author hopes, lead to a 'new professionalism' among development practitioners and academics.

*Rural Development – Putting the Last First* was published in 1983, in a low-cost edition subsidised by the Swedish Development Authority. Its popularity has been such that it has been reprinted six times. In July 1987, Robert Chambers met with a group of the AERDC's students – most of them experienced development professionals – to talk about his book and to explore some of the changes which have taken place since its first publication four years ago – changes which, it seems, are for the most part hopeful. Here is an edited record of the discussion.

*Although you have not stated this explicitly, do you think that development efforts have generally failed. I feel that the whole tenor of the book could indicate this feeling. Is it so?*

No it isn't. I had not meant to give this impression, but now I look back over the book I can understand how it has been gained by some readers, although I hope the book ends on a positive note in the final chapter (Chapter 8, entitled 'Practical Action').

I would even go further than to deny that I intended to give a negative impression of development efforts. I think that many development initiatives have had an over-negative evaluation. Take the Green Revolution for instance. If you look back at, say, the Indian economy in the 1960's and also at the understanding of development processes which people had then (recognising that we know much more now) then I think it can be seen as rational strategy, in spite of the fact that it had the effect of generating inequality. But now the development priority must be not the green revolution areas, which are well-endowed, but the hinterlands, the rainfed, the resource poor areas – for example, most of sub-Saharan Africa and large areas of Central India and parts of Indonesia.

*I wonder what you mean when you say that poverty is unseen – 'unperceived' as you call it in Chapter 1 of the book. There are conferences at which everyone talks about poverty, and the media are full of it.*

<sup>1</sup> *Health, agriculture and rural poverty: why seasons matter*. IDS Discussion Paper 148. Brighton, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. 1979. 26 pages.

<sup>2</sup> *Rural poverty unperceived*. World Bank Staff Working Paper No. 400. Washington, DC, The World Bank, 1980. Also published in *World Development* Vol. 9, no. 1, pp 1–19.

**The 1984 African famine has highlighted the existence of poverty worldwide, made it more visible.**

It is internationally much more visible in 1987 than it was in the early eighties. In international *professional* debate it has been in the forefront since MacMamara's Nairobi speech in 1973. But what has changed in the North over the past two or three years has been the visual impact, and the response which it generated, through Band Aid and so forth, to the famine in Africa. I think there is now a different sort of consciousness – a greater awareness of the ability to do something about the problem – than there was.

*Those who programme rural activities – people like us – try to see the problems we face. Your argument seems to be that planners and development practitioners do not actually perceive the rural poor and their problems, and you suggest that 'the last should be put first'. This is inviting planners to come up with ideas that can be formed into feasible, practical measures. Do you think that putting the 'last first' is a workable formula or criterion on the basis of which to modify projects?*

**– but there is still a danger that the voices of poor people are not listened to.**

Part of the problem is that planners and officials so often do not realise that there is a problem. We think that we know where poor people are, what their problems are and what should be done about it. We assume we know what is best for them. In the past this has often been wrong because it has been a projection of what we think their problems ought to be rather than what their problems are. The moment anybody (you or I or anybody else) says they think they know better than poor people what is right for them, then there is a problem. Almost invariably, if you ask poor people and enable them to articulate their problems and views – in a situation, that is, where you are able to get into a sensitive dialogue – then things will come out that are not expected.

*I'd like to raise two points with which I disagree, the first is where you mention 'clusters of disadvantages' in Chapter 5 entitled 'Integrated Rural Poverty' (page 108). You argue on the level of the household and say that households which are poor, are also physically weak, are isolated, are vulnerable to contingencies such as sickness or poor harvest and are powerless. Now I lived for a long time in Himalayan villages and I feel that even the most isolated household is within the network of the social and kinship structure. No household is an island.*

**The isolation of poor households within villages may be lessening as communications improve and poor people have access to good quality information about affairs which affect their lives – information which is potentially liberating.**

I'm glad you raised this. At the risk of over-simplifying, I wonder whether one can identify two types of area: one is the remoter, somewhat more traditional, somewhat more egalitarian areas, which have had a shorter period of contact and less intensity of contact with the market, commerce, capitalism and government. This would be like the place where you lived. Other areas have had longer, deeper contact, have become more commercialised and more developed. In your Himalayan village, the isolation is the isolation of the village as a whole. In the other type of area there is isolation of some households within a community. The village itself has changed in these areas. It does not have the cultural wholeness of, say, the Himalayan village. I can think of Indian cases where you can have people living on the fringe of a village who are barely part of the consciousness of the elite of the village.

*I still disagree; you are ignoring traditional communication systems which to an outsider are not visible. We are surprised that they are there at all; but it is startling how fast news can travel, and when it is beneficial it is absorbed immediately. The elements in this communication network will be, for example, women's clubs, the postman, the barber.*

But if you take a village in Tamil Nadu . . .

*Yes, I lived there for 7 years!*

. . . some of the villages have fringes which do not get the same level of communication as the core of the village. Would you say that a Harijan colony gets the same level of communication, the same quality of information about the outside world as the village elite?

*Yes, nowadays they do. It may have been different 20 years back.*

**The development efforts of the past two decades are not to be seen as failures.**

This is very important: it is a change which is taking place over time and is a significant qualification to what I have been saying. Better communication, better information can be liberating. Something relatively unthreatening to the elite, a way of broadening the base of power, is to broaden the base of knowledge. Knowledge about law, rights, government regulations for example is a source of power, and withholding that knowledge is a form of power which some people exercise – bank staff, lower- and intermediate level officials. Where knowledge about the rights of poor people under existing legislation and regulations generates a demand for rights of access to food for work, credit, and so forth, this is extremely hopeful.

*Can I move to the second point? You are demanding a 'new professionalism' and devote Chapter 7 to this. Now what you are demanding is people who are nothing short of heroes (or heroines) because you are asking them – and I am enthusiastic about this – to tell those above how things should be changed. But we should not ignore that people at field level have families and depend on their bosses for career promotion, for postings and so forth. Now is it realistic to ask for a 'new professionalism' at field level within the existing set-up?*

I don't think it's any coincidence that both Gandhi and Christ were hostile – that's probably too strong a word, were unsympathetic – to the family and the demands it could make. The family issue is a very powerful conservative force when one is thinking about new professionalism. It is one thing to take risks for yourself, that is hard enough; but it is quite another to take risks with your family. On the other hand, your family can be a very convenient excuse for not taking risks.

Photo: Oxfam



*Contingencies such as floods can leave poor households destitute; this vulnerability is one aspect of 'integrated rural poverty'.*

**The 'new professionalism' called for from development workers does not require them to become martyrs.**

*But who is willing to become a 'development martyr'?*

I am not really arguing for people to become 'development martyrs' unless they really wish to. Let there be development martyrs, but what I am really saying is that everyone who is involved in rural development has a mass of small decisions facing them which could go this way or that way. Some of them *may* involve the threat to a whole career and a person may decide to play safe; or they may play safe for a greater good later, so they get promotion carrying with it more power. But you could get many more people making those little switches when a decision comes up – the scientist in committee, for example, who argues that it is time we did some work on the diseases of cassava, or that we ought to find out what varieties of cassava women can peel most easily. These are very small things which don't necessarily threaten a career; they are topics you put on the agenda, points you argue about, allocations of funds which you make one way or another. There are all sorts of small choices of this kind which don't involve martyrdom but which add up.

The other side of this is an idea which I feel much more strongly about now because the empirical case for it exists in the sense that it is happening already – much more so than when I wrote the book – and that is networks of people who are allies of each other. I can give an example: the World Bank has now adopted very stringent rules indeed for the treatment and compensation and resettlement of people who are displaced by Bank-funded projects. These have startled some governments, as has

**Networks of professionals supporting each other can be very effective in influencing policy choices.**

Photo: IPPF



*Will better access to information networks empower marginalised people such as members of Harijan communities living on village outskirts?*

**Organisational hierarchies are necessary where funds are allocated centrally, but there is much scope for devolution of decision-making, and at all levels of a hierarchy it is possible to make choices which have a positive rather than a negative impact on rural poverty.**

the Bank's arguing with governments on how people who are displaced should be treated and saying that the Bank will monitor this carefully. This is an achievement of a particular group of people arguing this case in the Bank.

*But this example of ensuring that those displaced by, say, a large dam are well treated seems to me to be only a small degree of humanisation of a programme which the displaced people have had no control over, which has involved no participation, no consultation and which may not be in the interests of poor rural people at all. To argue for making choices in favour of the rural poor without putting yourself on the line is merely reformist; it is not a way of 'putting the last first'.*

The first point I'd make in response to what you have said is about big projects. There has been a very strong swing against big projects because many aspects of the development process which we now favour – and which I argue for – such as participation and consulting powerless people, are very difficult to reconcile with large projects. But it seems to me to be irresponsible to be against all large projects. Would it have been better *not* to have built the Aswan Dam which allowed densely-populated Egypt to have double cropping, much more intensive agriculture, even though the dam has had some dramatic side-effects, most of them on the negative side? It is a similar question to that I raised in relation to the green revolution. Dams are probably being built now which should not be built; perhaps the 'dam syndrome' has gone too far; but I think one has to be very careful not to over-generalise.

The other point, more important, is about reformism. Some people who are in positions of power have control over decisions which have big impacts, but they are not the only ones with their responsibility; everybody can do something. Even if you are at the bottom of a hierarchy, there is some room for manoeuvre. The important thing is that people should change at different levels in the hierarchy and enable one another to change, so that the room for manoeuvre is expanded and those people who want to make things better are supported.

*You don't envisage a change in the hierarchy?*

What do you mean by a 'change in the hierarchy'? – the abolition of the Department of Agriculture?

*You could envisage a substantial restructuring of the Department of Agriculture.*

But you must have hierarchies; you have funds which are centrally allocated, which you then have to distribute to different administrative units. However, what you can do is to give those units greater discretion and they can give their sub-units greater discretion. I think de-centralisation, devolution to lower levels of discretion, of control of resources and of decision-making, is extremely important. It is also important as far as possible to abolish 'target-setting', of the sort where targets are disaggregated down a hierarchy so that at field level a person is told to see that 20 acres are planted with hybrid cotton (or whatever). That is very unhelpful to the motivation of that person. So I feel decentralisation is vital. In that sense I am against hierarchy.

There have been many 'decentralisations' which have meant nothing at all because ministries of finance and accountants have fought all along the line to retain their power and their control. But there are also positive cases. I would not agree that people who get to the top of a hierarchy necessarily become a different sort of person and that they cannot then be in favour of the rural poor (if we have to use that phrase). I can think of outstanding people in posts like Secretary of Agriculture who have been very deeply committed and whose problem has been the middle levels and to some extent the lower levels where intentions and programmes get twisted. If you look at India's Anti-Poverty Programmes, huge budgets have been allocated to them, implying a political commitment at a high level. On paper they look very impressive. What happens, though, is deeply disappointing because of all the distortions and diversions by entrenched interests and pressures which occur as one goes down the system. This is why it is important to encourage people at all levels to try and change themselves, and to support other people in doing the same – particularly to support other people.

*I still want to come back to the reformist issue. If you put the last first, what happens to the first? Is yours a reformist liberal view which says everyone can be happy or do you see the 'first' as losing power and wealth? What are we meaning when we talk about 'the last'?*

It is interesting the way we are using this term 'reformism'. It is a perjorative term, is it not, to say something is 'reformist'? Suppose I turn it on its head and ask what term we should use for the alternative to reformism. Would it be 'revolutionary'?



Although the book proposes some radical changes of approach to problems of poverty and rural development, its standpoint is not 'revolutionary'.

Exciting developments are to be found in agricultural research oriented towards the needs of resource-poor farming systems and involving the participation of farmers themselves.

To criticise the book from a radical standpoint as 'reformist' may be to misunderstand its purpose, which is to raise awareness of the issues it addresses among people working within the whole range of organisations concerned with rural development.

*'Radical', perhaps . . .*

But I think that what I am saying is radical; if you were to call it 'radical reformism' I would be happy. You may ask me why I did not write a book called 'putting the first last'. The answer is that if the alternative to being reformist is to be a revolutionary, then I am not a revolutionary. There are two reasons for this. The first is that revolution is not very practical and the second is that, without wanting to over-generalise, things can well be worse after a revolution than before. Very many people get hurt in the process of a revolution.

*Perhaps we accept that revolution may not be the right thing. But what did you say about the possibility of different modes of intervention? I was a little disappointed that you did not give more space to discussing the point you make about 'enabling' approaches, for example. In spite of talking about 'new professionalism' and in spite of identifying the problem of 'clusters of poverty', I sometimes felt that, in the book, we were just going down the same old road of the professionals coming in with the projects; we were not looking at the alternative of promoting organisations of the poor, which will be able to generate their own ideas.*

I think that what you are saying is fair. But I did reach the stage when I had to stop writing. There is a whole chapter which is not in the book, which I have not written, in fact. This is about R & D and the development of technology. I had planned this, but I thought by the time I had completed eight chapters, the book was long enough and had taken enough time. There could well have been another chapter about organisations of the rural poor and the way in which they generate ideas, except that I did not know enough at that stage to write it. But this is the direction in which things are moving now, especially in the field. Agricultural research is a case in point. I am getting the strong impression that agricultural scientists, and social scientists, around the world, small numbers of them, are working with farmers and enabling farmers to generate their own priorities. This is something which was not happening before and which I think is very important. For the resource-poor areas, the 'hinterlands' including much of sub-Saharan Africa and rainfed areas generally, agricultural science methodology, as it is taught, is inappropriate because the methodology is reductionist; it can only deal with one or two or three or four variables at the same time, for statistical reasons, and everything has to be measured. Now this fits very nicely the stable, uniform 'green revolution' environments or the agriculture of the rich world; but it does not fit the complex, diverse and risk-prone agriculture of resource-poor areas. So one has to go back to rethink agricultural research methodology to offset the class and regional biases which are built into it in the name of science. In this process of rethinking, farmers come in, in an exciting way, with innovation workshops, with farmer panels, with farmers doing their own farming systems analysis and their own crop experiments instead of scientists or other outsiders doing it.

Some people with strong radical views who have criticised the book, may not have fully understood what I was trying to say in it. To have many different actors in different positions pulling in the same direction working for reversals and putting the last first can be powerful. We need voluntary agencies, and radical activists raising issues about what happens to tribals displaced by dams, and public rights lawyers. We also need the people in the other organisations who are going to welcome these outside pressures and use them as a weapon in their arguments within their own organisations. And we also need powerful people who are willing to be pulled. In writing the book, I wanted to hold the attention of actors across this whole range and say you are really allies. Some people find themselves working in an international organisation, some in a government department in a developing country, some in a voluntary agency. Some are journalists or lawyers; all of them can pull; but they need the others. If you are a civil servant you need the people who will keep on bugging you – who will keep on coming to your office and saying 'these people have been wronged'. I would defend my reformism, if you call it that, for two reasons. First, I cannot tell other people to be martyrs when I am not one myself (although I enormously admire people who move in that direction; they are to be praised and honoured). Second, I wanted the person in the international bank to read the book as well as the voluntary agency worker at the grassroots and for neither of them to be switched off. I wanted them both to realise that while they may be in opposition over some things, they can help and support each other by pulling in the same direction.

CHAMBERS, Robert. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. Harlow, UK, Longmans, 1983.