

IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

ARCHIVE COLLECTION

Volume 54 | Number 1A | March 2023

POWER, POVERTY, AND KNOWLEDGE – REFLECTING ON 50 YEARS OF LEARNING WITH ROBERT CHAMBERS

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Looking Back to Move Development Forward – A Fireside Chat with Robert Chambers

Stephen Thompson¹ and Mariah Cannon² with Robert Chambers³

This Archive Collection focuses on the articles contributed by Robert Chambers to the *IDS Bulletin* over the years, which explore various development dilemmas. In the spirit of participation, learning, and reflection (which have been such prominent features of Robert's scholarship), it felt only right to speak to Robert himself to hear his views on some of the enduring development challenges; therefore, in December 2022 we visited our colleague and our friend. This article details an extract from our conversation.

Firstly, Robert, how are you?

I'm fine and I'm lucky to be enjoying life still.

What's keeping you busy these days? What's exciting?

At my age, you tend to become autobiographical. I'm digging into some past things, particularly time that I spent in Kenya between 1958 and 1966, when [Kenyan] independence came in the middle and I was a District Officer. It was a thrilling time.

What do you use to help you remember what it was like back then?

Some of my old diaries and things I look at a bit, but a lot of it is just remembering. I must not start on this, or we won't get on to our subject today, but it is absolutely fascinating to explore the interaction of people and animals over time. In northern Kenya on the plains, when I was there, there were 1,500 zebra and 1,000 oryx. When I went back last time, which was about three or four years ago, none – and almost no cattle, where there had been maybe 1,000. Only ostrich. So, what had happened? I could go on momentarily, but this is the wrong subject. Come again another day.

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Did you have any kind of immediate thoughts or reflections when you saw the list of your contributions to the *IDS Bulletin*?

I was surprised. Then I recognised that they've been going at it for really a long time, and so one shouldn't be so surprised. Part of my feeling about it is just sheer gratitude that I've been amazingly fortunate in my life. I've had privileges. [My wife] Jenny has been just extraordinarily intellectually stimulating and supportive all the way through this. And I've had a series of bosses who have just said 'Oh get on with your thing' and haven't breathed down my neck, and most people never had that; or people with money who said 'Get on with it. Do your thing'.

In fact, just before you came, I had a phone call from Rosalind Eyben.⁴ She funded me in India. She may not admit it, but she did. Well, she was only part of the funding, but time after time I've been in a situation in which I'm funded. Nobody quite knows what I'm meant to be doing. Hurray – that is absolute freedom. I was at the administrative Staff College in Hyderabad in India and they didn't know what to do with me, and that was the time when Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was developing and there were these wonderful non-governmental organisations (NGOs). So, I spent my time with them, and nobody had to ask [about me] or even minded. That was sort of the freedom. Incredible privilege. When you see all this, you need to go back to those people who provided the funds [that brought flexibility and the freedom to do what I was doing]. It was astonishing.

One reflection about the breadth of time for which you've been involved in this field, and the contributions you've made to it, is that your work is still relevant. It was relevant then, and you've continued to be relevant, and we think sometimes certain ideas come about and they fade away and the person who contributed that idea gets stuck in the past as well. In your opinion, what has allowed you to stay relevant?

I don't know what the answer to that is. A test which you can do (it's not a test really, but it's an activity and exercise) is where you draw a circle, and then you draw lots of circles around the circle and in the circles around the circle you put 'Who am I?'. You can say, father, researcher, man, woman and you put these all the way round. That gives you your identity. Then you look at it all and you say what word or words go into the circle in the middle? What is the core of what you are? Well, when I did that, the word I wrote in the middle was explorer. It doesn't explain exactly, but it captures everything. I think that is important to me. Exploring is just great, great fun. Whatever you're exploring, it can be exploring your relationship, it can be exploring a book and it can be exploring by writing. Any number of things it can be, but exploring. You do that when you go back and see what you are.

This archive issue of the *IDS Bulletin* is all about your articles, but can you remember your first interaction with the *IDS Bulletin*?

The simple straightforward answer to that is 'no'. I must have

interacted with it, but I don't remember anything particularly. But it was always there. The whole time that I've been associated with IDS, there's always been an *IDS Bulletin*.

What do you think makes the *IDS Bulletin* unique or different from other development-oriented publications?

Speed of publication is a lot of the comparative advantage of the *IDS Bulletin*. You would submit something, or it would come out of some workshop, and then it's out quite quickly. Whereas other journals can take three to four years, and you can have endless refereeing. One of the things that is really not recognised adequately in our field is the cost in terms of demotivation, all this business of having referees and then having to change. The pathology of this which I've come across, is that you have to change everything. You change it, they send it back to the same referees, and then they make a whole other pile of suggestions, or they raise new questions. If you are a referee, you feel obliged to make comments and make suggestions of changes and improvements. Otherwise, you're not doing your job. So, you're obliged to be a nuisance.

You do feel an obligation to at least prove that you've read it, and sometimes the way you prove that you've read it is by making those types of comments. Maybe we should be more positive in our reviewing – encourage reviewers more to point out where someone has done things well, rather than just trying to point out where they have made mistakes. What is the most annoying comment you have ever received from a reviewer?

Well, that's a good question. I think I can't put a finger on a particular event, but I have been extremely irritated by comments which suggest to me that the person commenting either hasn't read the article or hasn't understood it and is maybe just justifying his or her misunderstanding. I don't know what the solution is.

You spoke previously about the advantage of how quickly the *IDS Bulletin* came out, and perhaps we can ask a follow-up question. We think it may be fairly obvious why having rapid outputs is advantageous, but could you say in your words why it is an advantage to prevent those two-to-three-year delays?

Yes, it's really frustrating, particularly if you've got something that you feel is important and worth saying. It's very, very frustrating to be held up and as far as I'm concerned, I would look around and see where there's a journal that will publish quickly. The best place to publish is *World Development*, in my view, but there are other ones; *Development and Change* I think is very professional. Being slow to publish is a disadvantage, and that would weigh in my decision about where to send something. Of course, they might say no, we don't want that anyway, but that's another story.

We think this reflects very strongly on what we've always thought has been a great focus of your work – the idea of practise. There are differences between development practitioners and development academics. For practitioners it's essential that what we learn is shared quickly because you want it to be actionable, but if it's shared three years later, it may no longer be relevant because contexts change so quickly.

I absolutely agree with that. It is what you can call ground truthing. It is pretty vital in our field. This means having had or somebody having had direct face-to-face on-site experience of what it is that they're writing about. If there isn't ground truth in there, then it belongs perhaps somewhere else. It would be strong for the *IDS Bulletin* to have that among its criteria – 'Anything will be welcomed for consideration, if it's based on recent grounded experience'. And then it is published fast, because this delay in learning is built into our knowledge system and our knowledge politics. You want stuff which is really, really up to date. The best stuff nowadays circulates on email or podcasts or in other ways which bypass the *IDS Bulletin* because there are more immediate ways of communicating and that maybe is something that the *IDS Bulletin* should consider.

Something that this archive issue has done beyond just reprinting old *IDS Bulletin* articles has been to think about how those topics and themes are still relevant today and in new ways and in different contexts. So maybe we could move on to questions that touch on why older knowledge is still relevant? One of the themes that we felt emerged from this collection of articles was around the importance of local knowledge. Today, the argument about whether local knowledge is useful or not has largely been won – local knowledge is accepted as important, but what isn't quite as clear is how the local knowledge influences how decisions around development processes are made. There seems to be a disconnect here which continues. We feel like this is perhaps due to the academic model and some of the issues of delay around publishing, but also, academia is largely dominated by the West. Knowing how important local knowledge is, how can we ensure that it's used effectively in development processes?

It's a big challenge, isn't it? And it also relates to how relevant to practise the knowledge is. In that connection I think one misleading idea is that if everything is decentralised (if it's not dominated by the West or Western countries, donors and all the rest of it), it will somehow be better grounded. That may or may not be the case because to be grounded and well-grounded most of the time requires funding. It's the funders who need to have a change of mindset and change of priorities and a change of their search processes, or their bidding processes, or whatever it is which lead to them devoting funds to research. So, it's a question of change of mindset of the funders and those who support them.

In your article 'Bureaucratic Reversals and Local Diversity' (Chambers 1988 [this *IDS Bulletin*]) you argue that powerful people (it could be funders, but it could be other powerful people) do not readily relinquish power. If this problem is common across humanity – and we think it's a problem that we could argue very easily still exists today, as much as it existed when you wrote this article – is change through development processes and interventions possible and if so, how?

The personal dimension is central to answering this question. There may be people who want power. But what sort of power is it? There are four types of power – power to, power over, power with, power within [see VeneKlasen and Miller (2002)]. But you see, there's a fifth one. And this is a roundabout way of getting to answering your question, and that's power to empower (or convening power).

When you think of it, many people who are uppers in situations have a lot of power to empower. This affects all of us in many ways and IDS is in a very strong position. Here it has power to empower. Convening power, which means you can bring people together who collectively will empower themselves and decide on things which should happen and maybe change their own understandings, their own actions, and so on. A lot of this, though, comes back to individuals and how they behave. Power is not necessarily a nice thing to have. It depends on the situation. With power comes responsibility. Many people might perhaps prefer not to have responsibility in particular situations.

One question for individuals and also for training, for education, and all the rest of it is: can you individually as a person take pleasure in empowering other people rather than exercising power yourself? If we had more people who are in that space and actually took satisfaction in empowering other people we'd be doing better. Teachers do this. They empower their pupils, and their pupils go off, and then their teachers can take a lot of pleasure in what those pupils do later in life. So, we've already got it on a massive scale in our societies. It is not something new, but it is something which could be spread and adopted more widely by development professionals.

We appreciate what you're saying in terms of the importance of individuals and their influence, but as well, within the development infrastructure you have the systems or the departments and so on. In your article 'The Self-Deceiving State' (Chambers 1992 [this *IDS Bulletin*]) you talk about how normal government development bureaucracy is resiliently static and robustly buffered against change. Has your view on that changed over time? If so, is it less so or more so now?

Yes, I think robustly buffered is a bit stark for the reality. I think there is quite a good flexibility now. I don't know why my view has changed on this, but I would hope it's because the reality has changed.

In your writing you are in general quite optimistic. For example, in your article 'All Power Deceives' (Chambers 1994 [this *IDS Bulletin*]), you talk about development professionals having the potential to empower people, and that if that happens then development interventions might better match practical realities. How do you balance staying optimistic while at the same time being critical of development?

Without much difficulty. Perhaps I'm being overly complacent. I think optimism can be to some degree, some of the time (but more often than we recognise), self-fulfilling. If you're optimistic and you go into a difficult situation with your optimism, it may rub off on other people. It may influence the way things go, say in a discussion. I think the way we behave in situations, it's not something that we talk about, it's one of those subjects, it's the elephant in the room, it's everywhere. How we interact and how we influence one another and where our discussions go, and so on. These are all things which really, really matter. Almost more than anything else. Yet, my impression is that they're not as central to discussion as they ought to be. I suppose that it's a bit threatening to go back to square one and say what are we doing here? What is this all about? What's the justification? We need to ask those questions. You know that you're going to come out of it saying, yes, we've got to do this. We've got to do that. You're optimistic that there will be a good outcome, and if you're optimistic that there will be a good outcome, there probably will be. But if you're pessimistic and 'Oh, isn't it terrible, blah blah blah', well, then things do become a bit more terrible. I believe in self-fulfilling fantasies.

In your writing you regularly question yourself and your approach. Reflexivity is at the heart of your writing. How important do you think reflexivity is today to someone working in development studies?

I think it's fundamental. I think it's important for everybody, but it's easy to say that when you're in the position that I'm in now. But for someone who's starting out on their career, if they're very reflective, reflexive, and self-critical, this may actually harm them. You can be self-critical without self-harming. But you must not self-harm – you can keep your self-criticism even to yourself, to a diary, for instance. Without necessarily exposing yourself and your view of your own failings to everybody else. Enjoy it – enjoy reflexivity, enjoy catching yourself out, and saying, 'Oh my goodness, look how I was behaving'.

You can get caught in the trap of questioning absolutely everything you do, and in some cases, it leads to immobility or stasis because you just question and question and question. So, it's helpful to hear from someone who's come through the other side, perhaps that there is a way to do it, while still moving forward, but being reflexive.

I think you need a dialogue between positive practitioners; I used to characterise it. Practitioners tend to be positive, and

academics tend to be negative. OK, they've both got their strengths, but they need to interact in a way which comes out energised rather than just dispirited.

Maybe that's something that the *IDS Bulletin* helps us do because we think as a practitioner/academic journal, it does create spaces for that kind of interchange of information. Yes, that's a good point.

One of the other features we noticed not just in your *IDS Bulletin* articles, but also in your books and other articles,⁵ is the focus on people living in rural areas which has been fairly consistent over time. For example, in your article 'In Search of Professionalism, Bureaucracy and Sustainable Livelihoods for the 21st Century' (Chambers 1991 [this *IDS Bulletin*]), you make it very clear that the focus has to be on rural people and rural lives. Do you think development should still focus on rural dwelling, and why?

I think it's shifted, and the reality has shifted. If you go back 40 years and you say what proportion of people live in rural areas and what in urban and you look at those proportions, and then you look now you'll find a very different picture. And so, I would downplay the role. One of the very valid criticisms that can be made of my work is that it has neglected urban poverty – I don't know anything about urban poverty. I am even more ignorant about urban poverty than I have been about rural poverty, I think. For future generations urban poverty is very much something to look at.

In our experience, many of those who are most marginalised in urban settings are recent migrants from rural settings. Unable to secure livelihoods in rural areas, they have migrated to the urban settings looking for economic opportunities and the ability to support their family. So, we wonder if a continued focus on the rural might actually prevent some of the urban poverty as well?

Part of the justification for the focus on rural poverty was to reduce migration to urban centres for exactly the reasons that you've given, and I think that may well still be the case. But I am a bit out of touch and out-of-date on these things now and I do recognise that they change quite rapidly.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes has been around technology. Not everyone would necessarily have access to or benefit from the technology available, but do you have any reflections on how technology might influence people living in rural areas and some of the development challenges that they face?

I think it's been transformative. I should imagine that most rural households in the world have got a mobile phone. That is an absolutely phenomenal change in terms of connection, being in touch and up-to-date. The impact of the changes in technology have been massive and probably still underappreciated. Maybe this is a subject for an *IDS Bulletin* – the impact of technological developments on rural life. I remember about ten years ago going

back to Samburu district [Kenya] where I worked in the 1960s and being astonished that there were telephone charging points all over the place. People were just very connected. It's a different world, it really is, and it was not foreseen I think, at least not by me. I don't know where it goes next.

You regularly acknowledge others in your work as a source of inspiration or creativeness. For example, you acknowledge the idea of uppers and lowers which was developed from a conversation with Jenny, your wife. How important is this for your writing process?

It is important – being able to have conversations about what you're working on is a wonderful opener of doors and opportunities to see things with a different perspective when you're talking. You're thinking in a different sort of way. I can't explain it, but I know that if I'm having a conversation with someone, then things can come out. It's a process. A conversation is a process, and you don't know exactly where it's going, but you do know that people are participating, and that can be very creative in the sense of uncovering insights which otherwise would not have been in the light.

Another feature we found interesting about your writing is that quite often you acknowledge people who have read an early draft, or even perhaps that you've had conversations with while you're writing. Is that something that you'd encourage other people to do?

Yes, and also encourage them to acknowledge if they can (you can't always). You don't know where the ideas came from. Just suddenly you've got them. They may not originate with you, and they may originate with somebody else, and they might feel annoyed, although no one's ever come up to me that I can recollect and said 'You pinched my idea'. I am a bit of a magpie, hopping around and picking up bits here and there as a scavenger. You can be an intellectual scavenger. I think that's quite a good thing to do. An explorer and the scavenger. Just look at how a crow behaves. Maybe it's not the most favourite bird, they're quite clever though. I think also they've got a sense of humour, haven't they? They play games sometimes. Now there's a subject for another *IDS Bulletin*. What can we learn from a crow? It would sell like hot cakes.

We've talked quite a lot about the past, drawing on some of your ideas from your *IDS Bulletin* articles and elsewhere. What do you think the next 50 years of the *IDS Bulletin* should focus on? What are the enduring questions that development needs to address?

The first thing is to say that just because an earlier *IDS Bulletin* has dealt with a subject, it is not a reason for abstaining from taking that subject further – this is really important. We should never say 'Done this – tick – move on'. I think you can put a tick and say 'Yes, we've got so far', but these learning processes tend to be circular and we need to be prepared to go round in circles, and to revisit, and go beyond where we were in the past.

So, part of my answer to your question about where things should go is they should look at the past. They should look for gaps. They should look for biases and blind spots. I think biases and blind spots are a sort of springboard. I don't think we do enough of this. Am I asking what are my biases? What do I prefer to see or prefer to learn about? What do I choose to study and choose not to study and why? That sort of reflexivity we need much more of. It's exciting because if you find a blind spot then you get excited, and you may genuinely be exploring new territory with all the excitement and the unexpected errors which go with that. If you don't have errors in your research life something must be wrong.

Perhaps we could turn it around and ask if you would like to ask any questions? We've been relentless with ours. Maybe you'll be a bit kinder with yours.

Well, I'm always interested in where things are going and where they could go – what do you feel about that? If you were in ten years' time or even five years' time looking back on now and asking yourself what's changed since then and what did we miss then that we now see as really, really important? I wonder whether in our fields we spend enough time reflecting on what we're missing. Why don't we have a workshop and brainstorm about all this? We used to do a fair amount [of brainstorming workshops] and they tended to be very, very fruitful. There are whole books which have come out of brainstorming workshops that we've had in the past. Do they happen now? Is funding sufficiently flexible that you can ask for funding for a brainstorming workshop? I rather doubt it. And it's very sad if that is the case. Maybe one needs to work on the mindsets and understandings about knowledges on the part of the funders? It comes back again to the funders, but it's difficult for them, isn't it?

I've been a funder with the Ford Foundation in India. You have this sense that you want to make sure that the money is well spent and that you have something to show for it at the end. The question then is, does that inhibit you so that you don't do adventurous things or take risks? You can ask, if we haven't had any failures, what's wrong? Are we just following on in the old ruts? Because if we get out of the ruts, we'll have to fall over into another one or something. We'll go wrong, but maybe we need more of that? Maybe an annual report should say, 'Here are the things that we have failed on this year, and this is what we're doing as a result'. It would be fun, wouldn't it? Would you like to have a go? List all your failures, and then share them with your colleagues, and if you haven't got any failures, then you are a failure. Come on, let's start!

Human connection is perhaps undervalued by funders. It is a challenge in a world where every penny needs to be accounted for. That, and of course, not every coming together is going to be successful, but in other cases it could be incredibly successful. It could be game-changing. How do we reach the point where more

human interaction can be funded and what that might look like going forward?

I think the word workshop is a useful umbrella for hiding all sorts of things, and many workshops have been fairly open-ended, and have led to books – a number of the participation books have come out of workshops.

Like the *Myth of Community*?

Absolutely, you've got it. The *Myth of Community* [see Guijt and Shah 1998], which is about gender, about women. That came out of an open-ended workshop – a situation in which people get to know one another in new ways and to understand one another in new ways. I think that's very important. I would say dress it up as a workshop.

You know about self-organising systems on the edge of chaos (SOSOTEC)? [See Cannon and Lewin with Chambers (2021) for a brief introduction.] It is a very creative zone. If you look at this as a spectrum – you've got a spectrum between rigid mechanistic formality and predictability here, and you've got utter chaos and unpredictability over here. But in the middle, where these two are overlapping – that's the zone of creativity. We need more of that zone of creativity where you're not sure where you're going. You're not sure about anything really, but you've got a sense of purpose and a sense that you're searching and that there's a collegiality in it as well. And it's fun – a lot of learning comes from fun.

I don't think we enjoy ourselves nearly enough in development. You need to be self-confident. To have the edge of chaos, you need to be confident that it's worth going along this route. Or optimism more than confidence. And the form that SOSOTEC takes is something which is unknowable, but there are dimensions of it like seating arrangements, how a room is organised, you know it should be organised so that all sorts of different things happen. Or **can** happen if people wanted them to happen. So that if you really want to discuss something, let's go and discuss it. There's somewhere where you can sit down, and you can do that. And then it moves around and people come and go. I love that – it's very, very creative and we don't do nearly enough of it. In fact, we don't train people in it. It's not really training, is it? There's no socialising into this way of being and interacting which can then be so very creative. I fear that that's been largely lost. I don't know. Planning is a dangerous word.

Have you come across optimal unpreparedness? If you prepare too much for something, then you get stuck with what you've prepared, and you feel 'I've got to cover that bit', when actually the conversation and the really exciting stuff has moved off in another direction. That's what happens if you over-plan. I've never heard anybody talk about optimal unpreparedness except myself. If you have a sense of insecurity, then you want to do the planning exactly and it's a self-fulfilling negative element.

[Over-planned workshops are] rigid and unable really to move forward with new topics or new ways of seeing things emerging. Leaving things open and leaving enough time – that is fun, exciting, and exploratory. It almost always leads to something good. Is there enough of that? If not, why not? Is it to do with funding, to do with conditionality, to do with targets? To do with mindsets, habits?

Any final thoughts for the future?

Let's do more of this. I really thoroughly enjoyed our conversation today and I wish we did more of it.

Robert, thank you very much for your time today and we'll look forward to speaking to you again.

Notes

- 1 Stephen Thompson, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 Mariah Cannon, Research Officer, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 Robert Chambers, Research Associate and Emeritus Professor, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 4 **Rosalind Eyben** is an Emeritus Fellow at IDS and was previously Chief Social Development Advisor at the UK's Department for International Development (now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office – FCDO).
- 5 See the [IDS OpenDocs Robert Chambers Archive](#).

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