

IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

ARCHIVE COLLECTION

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

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Glossary

Robert Chambers and the *IDS Bulletin* – Some Reflections for Now and the Future

Melissa Leach¹ and Peter Taylor²

1 Introduction

From our leadership positions in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and in the Editorial Steering Group of the *IDS Bulletin*, it is a pleasure and a privilege to add a note of introduction to this Archive Collection focusing on one of the *IDS Bulletin's* most influential and prolific contributors. We have also been fortunate to call ourselves friends and colleagues of Robert, having known him for many years. Probably in common with many of those he has worked and spent time with across the world, we could fill pages with personal stories of what we have learned with and from him, not least from Robert's insistence on being prepared to up-end one's preconceptions, to be open to thinking and doing differently, to attend seriously to the voices and perspectives of people marginalised by dominant forms of knowledge and power, and to challenge power relations in all their variety. In the context of IDS, we could fill many further pages with Robert's foundational contributions to the Institute's research, teaching, learning, and influence over the five decades since he joined in 1972. Robert and his work have been absolutely central to the unfolding story of development and development studies during this period, and to IDS' place in it. This was captured beautifully and with the enthusiasm, dynamism, and humour one associates with all things involving Robert during the Revolutionising Development week we hosted at IDS in April 2022 to celebrate his contributions, and in the responses to the re-launch of the book edited by Cornwall and Scoones (2011), reflecting on his work, and in the testimonials that followed.³

Just as Robert's work has been part of IDS' evolving story, so has the *IDS Bulletin*, and it seems fitting to publish an Archive Collection that showcases and celebrates this intertwining. The Issue Editors highlight parallels between Robert's work and the

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IDS Bulletin, in that both share values and legacies in championing critical thinking, bringing lesser-heard voices to the fore, and fostering ongoing learning and reflection. One might add to these parallels a commitment to 'engaged' research and evidence – both Robert's work and the *IDS Bulletin* remain resolutely focused on mobilising knowledge to make a difference and transforming lives. We see a consistent commitment to co-constructing knowledge with people in wider society – found in Robert's participatory methods, and in the *IDS Bulletin's* inclusion of contributions from practitioners, policymakers, and activists as well as 'established' researchers; and a commitment to communicate well to multiple audiences. Just as Robert has consistently challenged 'normal' professionalism, science, and academia, so the *IDS Bulletin* has – as the *IDS Bulletin* website puts it – sought to publish 'intellectually rigorous articles developed through learning partnerships on emerging and evolving development challenges presented in an accessible manner in themed issues that bridge academic, practice, and policy discourse'.⁴ Robert's contributions to the *IDS Bulletin* have truly been central in shaping it, forging its values, style and reputation; one might even say that the *IDS Bulletin* and Robert's work have co-developed, and have helped shape development studies.

2 Looking back as a means to look forward

The articles selected for this Archive Collection are just a small number amongst Robert's vast plethora of work and publications, but still form a hugely important contribution to the wide array of *IDS Bulletin* articles published since its launch in 1968 and its impact on development studies. Individually and collectively, Robert's *IDS Bulletin* articles selected for this Archive Collection – grouped under the themes of rural development, local knowledge and participation, power, and bias – speak of course to only some of the themes and stories that have been significant in the dynamics of development discourses over this period. Yet they are an important set of topics in their own right, with several of these articles having been foundational, launching whole fields. The article on Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK) (Howes and Chambers 1979, this *IDS Bulletin*), for instance, was the first publication on this topic, launching a concept and setting in train decades of work applying, critiquing, and further developing it in ways that have influenced thought and practice far beyond development studies – from the sociology of science to many natural science and technical fields.

Similarly, this Archive Collection includes some of Robert's most significant contributions on participatory methods, power, and bias. They demonstrate a potent characteristic of Robert's often passionate writing and personal philosophy that self-reflection is a crucial dimension of learning, and that the processes and outcomes of development are shaped and underpinned by relationships. As the Issue Editors observe, in some cases the concepts and languages used in these articles might seem outdated, as debates

and the politics of knowledge have moved on. But this can be seen as an opportunity more than a problem. Part of the value of an archive collection is that it is able to trace a history of ideas, concepts, and languages, and here we have a set of pieces that help track the unfolding thoughts of one of development's key thinkers over half a century, that can be read productively in engagement with the work of others at the time. Although this history is inevitably partial, it is still valuable in providing fuel for further reflection and critique. Such a process of engaged learning involving reflective practice is very much in the spirit of Robert's own work, and in the spirit of how we see the *IDS Bulletin* as a whole within the wider field of development studies.

The most recent article in this collection was published over ten years ago (Chambers 2012, this *IDS Bulletin*). Yet in the decade since, Robert has continued to write and publish prolifically in other outlets, whilst the *IDS Bulletin* has continued to reflect his legacy in both substance and style. But what about the future? When we celebrated Robert's work in April 2022, Robert himself was insistent that 'looking back' should be a means to look forward. The same can be said of this *IDS Bulletin* issue.

3 Conclusion and looking forwards

It is certainly a turbulent time for development. People and places are facing multiple crises that are intersecting in their drivers and impacts. There are intensifying complexities as climate, environmental, health, and economic shocks and stresses unfold across the world, as well as heightened inequities and forms of marginalisation in fractured societies and fragile democracies.

There are shifts in the politics of knowledge, truth, and trust in a world of deep uncertainties and digitalised information. Many of these dynamics are undoing 'development' in its broadest and simplest sense, as put so aptly by Robert, of 'good change' (Chambers 1997: 1744). They also reveal a world of disruption, contradiction, and uncertainty. Many of the tenets of 'normal' Development with a big D – the discourses and practices of the aid industry – no longer hold – if indeed they ever did. Long-dominant approaches, such as those promoting economic growth, market liberalisation, globalisation, carbon-intensive industries, and command-and-control planning regimes, are now under challenge as never before. The idea that development programmes can be designed in some places, usually by people and organisations with immense power and privilege, and then rolled out to other places – always distasteful – now seems anathema indeed. In this context at IDS, and with key partner organisations, it is becoming clear that a 'recasting' of development and development studies is needed, underpinned by the centrality of universality (development as progressive change for all), plurality, justice, equity, and resilience. Rather than small adjustments and tweaks to concepts and practices, we are calling for a radical reimagining of what is possible.

In this context, Robert's work remains as relevant as ever, and indeed offers vital insights into intersecting challenges – climate and environmental change, poverty and inequalities, and the relationships between science and policy, knowledge and decision-making, and truth and trust – that have become even more significant in recent years. Many of the themes and topics addressed in these *IDS Bulletin* articles offer direct value in catalysing and contributing to this recasting of development and development studies for now and the future. In sum, this note, and the *IDS Bulletin* Archive Collection itself, are a vote of thanks, and a celebration.

Thank you Robert for an extraordinary legacy, and an ongoing set of ideas and commitments that are both personal and unique, yet also of such broad relevance. As we think forwards to recasting development, may the insights charted here and the spirit they embody continue to catalyse thinking, reflection, and learning amongst us all, into the future.

Notes

- 1 Melissa Leach, Director, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 Peter Taylor, Director of Research, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 See **Reflecting on Robert Chambers' Work: Testimonials**.
- 4 See *IDS Bulletin – About the Journal*.

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