

W. ETHIOPIA WORDS

Chambers

1 Words, power and the personal in development

Words, power and the personal in development¹

Robert Chambers

Introduction

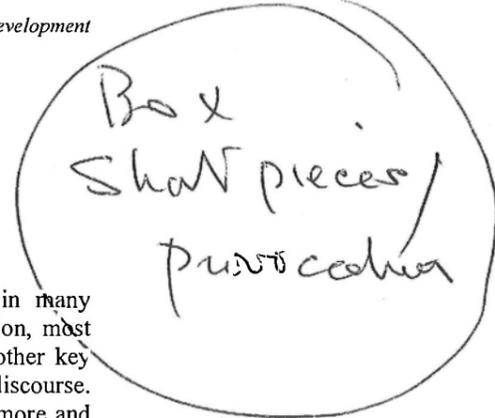
Change in our world and in development appears to be accelerating in many dimensions. Some of these changes are obvious and receive much attention, most notably information technology and communications. At the same time, other key areas of change have been relatively neglected in development practice and discourse. Three which have been little on the agenda of concern but which are now more and more recognised for their significance are :

- words – the words and languages used by development professionals
- power and the relationships associated with power
- the personal – what sort of people we, as development professionals, are and how we behave.

Words, power and relationships, the personal

Words, power and relationships, and the personal are interconnected in many ways (Figure 1). In *The Web of Being* (1996) Capra wrote:

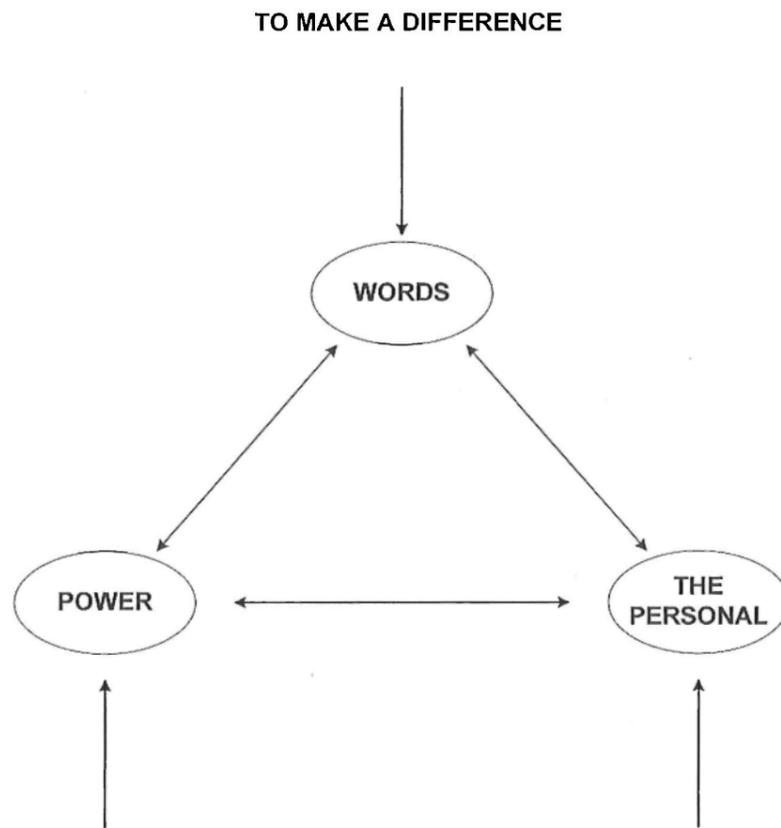
The uniqueness of being human lies in our ability to continually weave the linguistic network in which we are embedded. To be human is to exist in language. In language we coordinate our behaviour, and together in language we bring forth our world.



¹ This is an expanded and revised paper based on notes of and diagrams from a talk given at the 7th International Language and Development Conference, Addis Ababa, October 2005. I have introduced a little material which has appeared since that Conference.

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Note :
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Figure 1 : Language and development

Relating language, power and the personal thus raises questions as to whose language and whose words count. In whose language do we - or are we - compelled or induced to exist? In whose language do we - or are we - compelled or induced to coordinate our behaviour? And in whose language do we together bring forth our world?

The words and phrases used in development are instruments of power and reflect relationships. In subtle and not so subtle ways, languages can reflect power relations and realities. For example, social relations can be embedded in a language. A clear illustration can be found in English where the words for animals – ox, cow, sheep, ewe, ram, pig, sow – are those of the conquered Anglo-Saxon serfs who herded the animals, whereas the words for meat - beef, veal, mutton, pork – are those of the conquering Normans who ate them. And today, invasive and dominating languages which become lingua francas - like English, French, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Hindi and Arabic - marginalise and disempower those who do not command them well.

An example : a poor man in Northern Ghana with whom a colleague stayed on an immersion programme was frustrated that he had not been taught English. His own language, Pasali, was spoken by only 30,000 people. He had been arrested in Kumasi for urinating against a wall. He could read, but he did not understand the notice of prohibition against urinating because it was in English.

Another example : in the past, the staff of the international NGO ActionAid estimated that they spent a quarter of the year writing and polishing and correcting reports written in English. They felt, perhaps correctly, that they would be judged on the quality of their written English.

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Differential command of languages can lead to mutual disrespect, with perceptions of arrogance on one side and stupidity on the other. Many of us will have experienced this on both sides. I know that I have been insensitive in speaking too fast or using difficult words with people for whom English is their second, third or fourth language. I am also ashamed to confess having declined to supervise a Japanese student in the first year of a two year course because his limited grasp of English misled me into underestimating him; in his second year, I took him on, and he wrote the best thesis of any student I have ever had.

New words, expressions and acronyms, and the realities or processes they represent, are continually being introduced into development. They act as instruments of power. Many of us will have experienced a sense of marginalisation when a new one comes along. This was my experience with *civil society*. At first I did not dare to use the term because I was afraid someone would ask me what it included and did not include. I did not know, and I still do not know, but I no longer fear being asked : it is so widely used that now I could simply throw the question back to the person asking it.

Many of these words, expressions and acronyms travel and spread round the world through word of mouth, emails, websites and writings which are based in or originate from Washington DC, most prominently the World Bank. The verse 'Words of Power' remarks on some, all concerned with power relations, which are now widely used, by the Bank and by development professionals more generally.

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Words of Power

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

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

Ever to maintain our power
We frame meanings by the hour
Opposites for you and us
Yours are minus, ours are plus

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

Partnership we all agree
Reflects the way we want to be
Fraternally as bigger brothers
We're more partner than you others

Lending and loans we never name
Grants and loans we treat the same
Merging distinctions is professional
Donor funding is *concessional*

Mutual *transparency's* a must
To gain the benefits of trust
In practice it's a one-way fake
We see through you while we're opaque

Self doubt's strictly for the birds
When power weakens, change the words
We have confidence in our trick
Listening's our new rhetoric

Accountability we require
Of the lower to the higher
For us as uppers it's a plus
It means that you account to us

We're now the Listening Bank that cares
Wrenched with anguish, drenched in tears
As we harken more and more
To the Voices of the Poor

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

On our Empire the sun won't set
We are the Lords of Poverty yet

There are now so many of these words (see Table 1) that bingo² can be played with them in meetings or during seminars and lectures.

Table 1 : Selection of words widely used in development in past ten years

empowerment	globalisation	social capital	harmonisation	mainstream
participation	liberalisation	sustainable livelihood	delivery	rights-based
partnership	security	civil society	logframe	chronic poverty
accountability	capacity building	fragile State	effective	voice
ownership	pro-poor growth	state capability	stakeholder	corruption
transparency	budget support	social protection	citizen	results-based
driving seat	climate change	human Rights	multi-Dimensional	vulnerability

The list in Table 1 could perhaps be supplemented with a list of acronyms, such as the following :

² In Bingo, also known as Housey-housey and Tombola, players have sheets with columns of numbers which they tick as they are called out. The first person with a completed column shouts 'bingo'. With these development words the cry could be 'development'.

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CDD : Community Driven Development
 PRSP : Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
 PSIA : Poverty and Social Impact Analysis
 MDG : Millennium Development Goal
 RBM : Results-Based Management

Awareness of the frequency with which these terms and acronyms are used or over-used should encourage us to identify other terms and concepts which are important but still under-used. Such terms include 'power' and 'relationships'.

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Sometimes these frequently employed terms are simply dismissed as buzz words, as words of merely transitory importance. However, to do this may lead us to miss much of their significance for they both represent and can bring about shifts in orientation and thinking.

Six terms which have become particularly prominent in recent years are 'participation', 'partnership', 'empowerment', 'ownership', 'accountability' and 'transparency'. All refer to power and relationships³, and all are used with hypocrisy : there is a gap between how the word is used and what it implies, and then what is done in practice.

Four ways stand out in which words are used as part of a power play in development :

1. *To legitimise actions* – as with these six power and relationship words. In the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* (OECD 2005), the most commonly used development noun is 'partner' which (together with 'partnership') appears 96 times. The term 'donor' is close behind with 70 appearances and 'aid' appears with 61 occurrences. (This is discussed in more detail below.) Another example is the phrase 'community-driven development', which sounds good but which in practice often takes the form of top-down centre-outwards infrastructure programmes which are driven not by communities at all but by pressures to disburse, needing to spend funds before the end of the financial year (World Bank OED 2005). It is a commonplace that such target-driven development inhibits self-help, induces dependence and reduces ownership and sustainability.

2. *To maintain dominance*. People feel disempowered when new words, phrases or acronyms come in, and they neither know what these terms mean nor do they want to show their ignorance by asking; these terms often come as part of the baggage of new required conditions (in the jargon, 'conditionalities') or procedures which impose new burdens. An example is what has been described as 'assessment overload', the reports required from borrowing countries by the World Bank, of which in 2002 there could be as many as sixteen (Wilks & Lefrançois 2002:13).

3. *To camouflage and conceal realities*. A stark example is the last chapter of the *World Development Report 2000-2001* (World Bank 2000), concerning aid⁴. The World Bank is a lender and puts countries in debt. But the word 'lender' appears nowhere in the chapter, and 'loan' is used only in the context of rescheduling debt,

³ For recent sources on power and relationships, see Eyben 2006 and Eyben, Harris and Pettit 2006.

⁴ For a fuller analysis of the cosmetic and dissembling use of language in the World Development Report see Chambers 2001.

and then only four times. Instead the terms 'donor' and 'donors' are used over one hundred times⁵, while loans are camouflaged through the phrases 'donor funds', 'aid money', 'resource flows', 'concessional funds', 'concessional financing' and 'concessional assistance'. More recently, the conditionalities of aid - earlier 'structural adjustment' - have been relabelled 'policy and programme lending'.

4. *To sanitise, stereotype or stigmatise.* CNN stopped calling Gilo, an illegal Israeli settlement on Palestinian land, a 'Jewish settlement' and instead used the comfortable, cosy, friendly term 'Jewish neighbourhood'. Supplies of arms to Palestine are 'arms smuggling' but to Israel they are 'defence supplies'. Another set of examples is the spectrum from 'freedom fighter' and 'martyr' through 'belligerent', 'guerrilla' and 'insurgent' to 'terrorist' and 'murderer'; these terms are used in contemporary conflicts by each side to describe the other, blind to the irony of symmetry.

There are many other examples of such pejorative or positive labelling in development⁶, as Table 2 illustrates.

Table 2 : Pejorative and positive terms in development contexts

Pejorative term	Positive term
slash-and-burn	fallow farming
Squatter	settler
Encroacher	pioneer
Poacher	commercial hunter
Smuggling	cross border trade
illegal immigrant	refugee

Types and pathways of power

Four types of power can be distinguished (VeneKlasen with Miller 2002:45) :

- power *over*, meaning the power of someone who is 'upper' over someone who is 'lower'
- power *to*, meaning effective choice, the capability to decide on actions and implement them
- power *with*, meaning collective power
- power *within*, meaning self-confidence.

Despite common usage in which power is gained or lost, power is not like a commodity of which it is good to have more and bad to have less. Reality is more nuanced and complex. It is here that power and the personal dimension interrelate. 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. See Figure 2.

⁵ The World Bank is mainly a moneylender but calls itself a donor. It is a nice irony that anyone in the World Bank who described a moneylender in a developing country as a donor might be met with incomprehension.

⁶ For the power of labelling in development practice see Eyben and Moncrieffe 2006.

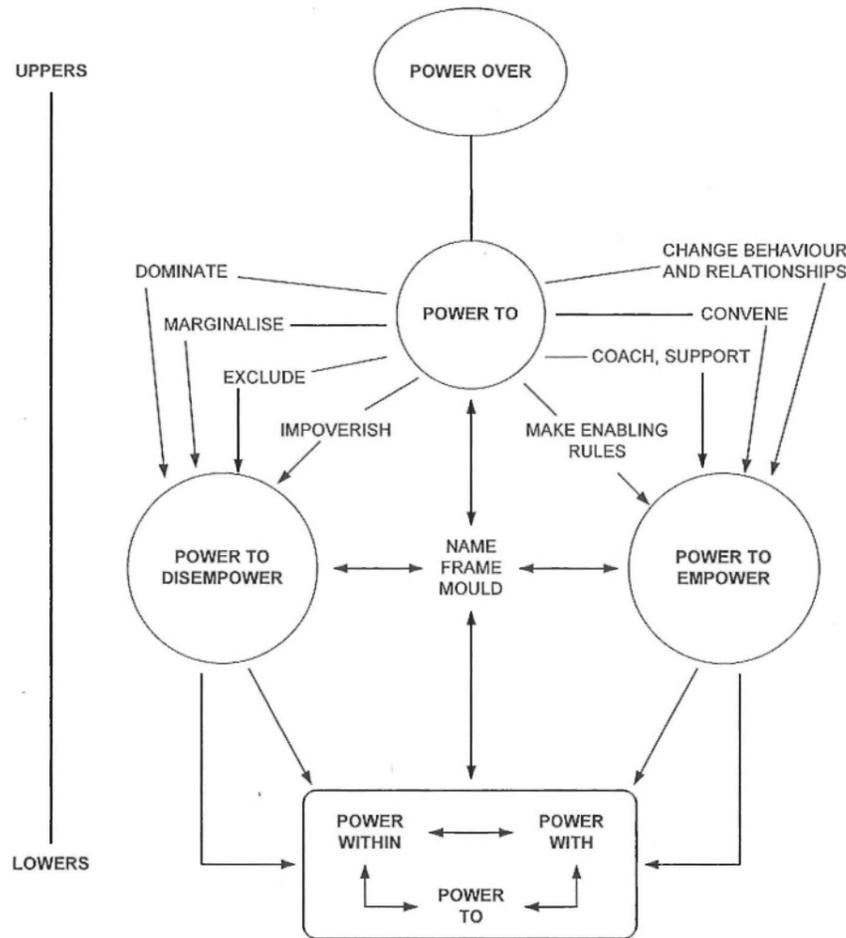


Figure 2: Types and pathways of power

When used in this way, there can be many gains for the 'uppers' (those who are dominant or superior in a context) : they can experience less stress, enjoy better relationships, and find pleasure in seeing what the 'lowers' (those who are subordinate or inferior in a context) are capable of. They can also experience greater efficiency and effectiveness⁷. The 'uppers' also have power, especially as parents and teachers do, through speaking, teaching and communicating, to name, frame and mould mindsets. Who does this naming, framing and moulding, how, and in what circumstances, and who is empowered or disempowered, are areas for further exploration and analysis. Most commonly it originates from uppers – the World Bank, aid agencies, intellectuals of various hues – and expresses and forms their mindsets and shapes their actions and those of others. And this may empower or disempower the lowers, depending on purpose, context and process.

⁷ For a fuller treatment of gains to 'uppers' from empowering 'lowers' see Chambers 2006.

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In all this, the effects of the adoption and legitimising of words are not trivial. 'Globalisation' and 'liberalisation', when used or assumed as motherhood words, can be used to justify a cluster of often questionable policies. Conversely, the adoption and legitimising of good governance, and the repeated naming of corruption, have brought into the open issues that were previously hidden and that have needed to be confronted. The power to name and frame, and to mould and orient mindsets, itself has to be named, recognised and consciously used for good purposes.

Words used in development can be embedded through repetition, as we noted earlier. The *Paris Declaration* (OECD 2005) is a striking illustration. Though a short document, the density of key words is striking. For that document, a sentence can be composed of frequently used nouns and verbs as follows :

To monitor indicators of effective performance from aid, donors and partners need the capacity to manage the mutual harmonisation of programmes to assess, measure, and report on results⁸

Paradigmatically, this is a mechanistic world with organisations rather than people where aid effectiveness is to be achieved through top-down standardised bureaucratic norms, with measurements and upwards reporting of results

A shadow sentence can be made up of words that do not appear in the *Paris Declaration* :

To **negotiate** and **evolve agreements** that **optimise outcomes** for **poor, vulnerable** and **marginalised people** requires **compromises** and **trade-offs** based on **personal conviction, interactions** and **relationships** that **nurture trust, and reflective appreciation** of **power** and **conflicts**.

Paradigmatically, this is a world that names and recognises the realities and significance of power, trust, negotiation and relationships in aid (see for example Eyben 2006), and above all of poor people. Many words, like those in the shadow sentence, are candidates for future use.

An agenda?

There will be many ideas about an agenda for analysis and action. Here are six ideas presented rhetorically as questions.

1. *Enhance and celebrate linguistic richness and diversity?*

The Inuit are said to have at least 63 words or expressions to describe conditions of snow (de Boinod 2005:166-167). At a recent party, an Indian and a Nepali identified eighteen Hindi words or expressions for different forms of non-violent protest.

⁸ The frequency with which each of these key words appears in the *Paris Declaration* is shown in brackets : 'To monitor (18) indicators (30) of effective (38) performance (17) from aid (61), donors (70) and partners (96) need the capacity (20) to manage (17) the mutual (12) harmonisation (21) of programmes (22) to assess (16), measure (11) and report (11) on results (20).'

Somali words for different degrees of thirst are said to be numerous. We need to celebrate the richness of perception and discrimination of such diversities. A brilliant example was the front page of the London-based newspaper *The Independent* on 26 July 2006 headed '26 pupils. 26 languages. One lesson for Britain' which showed 26 pupils from the same primary school⁹, and all their 26 different native tongues.

We also need to respect people's priorities for learning English, which increasingly is the language of power, of access, of the market, of employment.

English as the inexorably dominant global lingua franca has adopted many words from other languages. Many concepts in other languages, like 'ubuntu'¹⁰, have much to offer but have not yet been adopted to a significant degree. It is a question whether we should make more effort to enable very young children, at the stage when they can easily learn languages, to be brought up bilingually or multilingually. Should we, development professionals and uppers generally, enhance and celebrate linguistic richness and diversity?

2. *Narrow gaps?*

Much can be done to narrow the hypocrisy gaps between words and actions. This can apply especially to the words associated with power, like the six frequently used words which we discussed above. In international aid, this applies most starkly to 'partnership', a word used repeatedly to describe manifestly unequal relationships (Eyben 2006). Should narrowing such gaps - by challenging those with power to define what the words should mean in terms of their relationships with their 'partners' - be at the core of a campaign to improve aid?

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3. *Non-verbal and visual communications?*

Should we use video, theatre and other forms of communication, given their potential for enabling weakness to speak truth to power, and for power to learn? Participatory video has shown a big potential here, with local people, literate or non-literate, displaying remarkable capabilities to express themselves through taking videos (Lunch & Lunch 2006). Theatre, puppetry and mime also enable people who are subordinate to speak truth to power (Abah 2004, McCarthy with Galvao 2004). Should we, development professionals, do much more to encourage such creative forms of communication through drawings, diagrams, theatre and video, especially where they can empower and give voice to those who are weak and marginalised?

4. *Define terms?*

Jargon can be useful technical and professional language for some, and unintelligible gibberish to others. Often it empowers some and disempowers others. Should we insist on glossaries of terms in papers and reports as a matter of course and of good professional practice? How many terms have I used in this paper which I should have either omitted or explained?

⁹ The school was Uphall Primary School in Ilford, UK.

¹⁰ 'Ubuntu' (Nguni language of South Africa) = humanity, mutual interdependence, 'I am because you are'.

5. *Introduce and use words proactively?*

Expressions like 'social capital' (especially in the World Bank) and 'sustainable livelihoods' (especially in DFID, the UK Department for International Development) have served internal political purposes in power relations, enabling a degree of levelling with dominant economics and economists, and providing an acceptable common ground which is not owned by any one discipline.¹¹ When invited to name positive words expressing concepts, values and actions that they would like to be become common in development discourse, participants in workshops have often proposed and given high scores to the following :

- | | | | |
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| critical | empathy | ethics | honesty |
| humility | justice | listen | love |
| peace | reflect | redistribution | respect |

6. *Address the personal dimension?*

Changes in attitudes, behaviours and mindsets are so obviously fundamental to good change that they tend to be overlooked. See Figure 3.

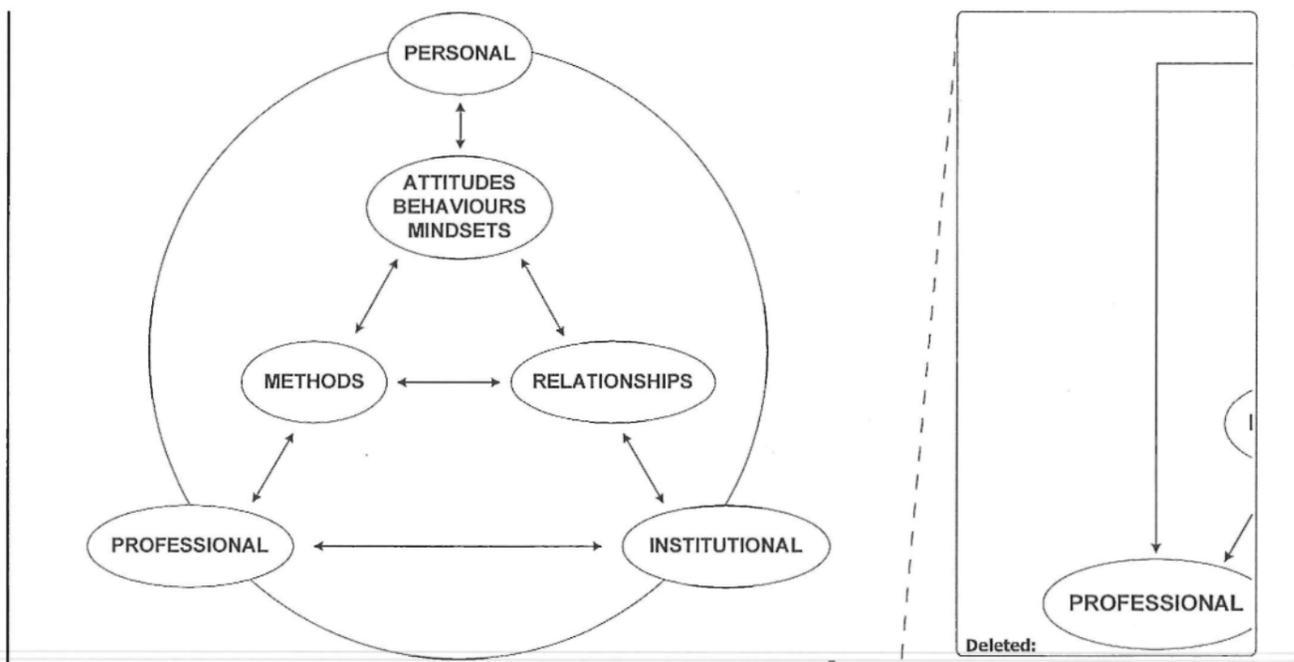


Figure 3 : Dimensions of change

¹¹ For a summary of the institutional and power-related functions of the terms 'social capital' in the World Bank and 'sustainable livelihoods' more generally, see Chambers (2005:200-201) which also gives sources.

What happens and does not happen in development practice so manifestly depends on development actors and what they do and how they do it and what they do not do, what they say and how they say it and what they do not say, and on their behaviours, attitudes, mindsets and relationships, that it is nothing short of bizarre that these personal aspects have received so little attention. Should they, not least in the domains of language and development, now be placed centre stage? And are the words which we use and the uses which we make of our personal power a place to start?

To ask these questions is embarrassing for I do not do what I say. However, you will recognise that I cannot help having been born English, and will know that for the English hypocrisy is an art form. So, if you are generous and understanding, you will appreciate that I am only practising and affirming my national, or perhaps more accurately tribal, culture, in ending with Gandhi's challenge to us all ;

We must become the change we wish to see in the world.

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Robert Chambers

From: Hywel Coleman [h.coleman@adm.leeds.ac.uk]
Sent: 30 January 2007 22:06
To: Robert Chambers
Cc: Nuru, Nejat (Ethiopia)
Subject: RE: HC to 17 Chambers Publication



17 Chambers
9.doc (453 KB)

Dear Robert

Thanks for the additions. I have incorporated these and also made a cross reference to your earlier mention of the Paris Declaration.

Figure 3 has been revised, I hope to your liking.

What is attached is therefore, I hope, the final version, but don't hesitate to let me know if anything else needs tidying up.

As for the date of publication I have promised the British Council in Addis that I will get the fully edited manuscript to them by the middle of March. Thereafter the printing, distribution, etc will be in the hands of the BC.

Many thanks for all your help with this.

Best wishes

Hywel

From: Robert Chambers [mailto:R.Chambers@ids.ac.uk]
Sent: Sat 27/01/2007 14:27
To: Hywel Coleman
Cc: Nuru, Nejat (Ethiopia)
Subject: RE: HC to 17 Chambers Publication

Dear Hywel,

I have added a bit about the Paris Declaration, and put the number counts in a footnote. However, if you want to save space and words, the numbers could be in the main text after the words and the footnote eliminated. Over to you.

I hope no howlers have crept in. It has been enjoyable working on this.

When is the publication due out?

Best wishes

Robert

-----Original Message-----

From: Hywel Coleman [mailto:h.coleman@adm.leeds.ac.uk]
Sent: 26 January 2007 11:53
To: Robert Chambers
Cc: Nuru, Nejat (Ethiopia)
Subject: RE: HC to 17 Chambers Publication

Dear Robert

Many thanks for your message and the revised version of your chapter.

- 1) I will ask my colleague to revise Figure 3 in the way you suggest.
- 2) Please do go ahead and expand the section about the Paris Declaration - it is very revealing.

All the changes which you have made are clear and will be incorporated.

Thanks again.

Hywel

From: Robert Chambers [mailto:R.Chambers@ids.ac.uk]
Sent: Thu 25/01/2007 15:24
To: Hywel Coleman
Subject: RE: HC to 17 Chambers Publication

Dear Hywel,

Thanks for your work on this. I have made the necessary changes, added a reference, and dealt with your queries, I think, and done it in track changes.

The figures and so on are in the correct places.

The figures are OK, and thanks to your colleague who did them. The one about dimensions of change would be much better with curved outer lines, instead of angular ones. If that cant be done, one option is to draw the diagram by hand, which I could do, and mail to you.

OECD 2005 is now in

Your changes look OK to me.

I have eliminated the last sentence.

There is an option of expanding the bit on the Paris Declaration. Here is something I have written about it. This is going to be published

elsewhere, but could also be here. Let me know if you would like something on these lines - I would top and tail it differently in order to make it fit.

I realise of course that you may prefer, and it may be better, to leave things as they are!

Good luck with this. Please keep me informed of progress.

Robert

The following could be shortened.

"A question worth asking is whether word counts of policy documents can reveal more now, in the early 21st century, than in the past. This could be so if there is more attention now to using currently fashionable terms, and also where international consensus on content is needed. Perhaps as donors engage in harmonisation of policies, they also harmonise, or rather standardise, their vocabulary and then sing together not only from the same hymn sheet but in unison. These conjectures are supported by an analysis of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, drawn up in Paris in February/March 2005 (DAC 2005). Though a short document, the density of key words is striking. For that document, an emblematic sentence can read: To monitor indicators of effective performance from aid, donors and partners need the capacity to manage the mutual harmonisation of programmes to assess, measure and report on results. The scores are To monitor (18) indicators (30) of effective (38) performance (17) from aid (61), donors (70) and partners (96) need the capacity (20) to manage (17) the mutual (12) harmonisation (21) of programmes (22) to assess (16), measure (11) and report (11) on results (20)

Paradigmatically, this is a mechanistic world without people where aid effectiveness is to be achieved through top-down standardised bureaucratic norms, with measurements and upwards reporting. A shadow sentence can be made up of words never used in the Declaration: To negotiate and evolve agreements that optimise outcomes for poor, vulnerable and marginalised people requires compromises and trade-offs based on personal conviction, interactions and relationships that nurture trust, and reflective appreciation of power and conflicts. Paradigmatically, this is for a world that names and recognises the realities and significance of power, trust, negotiation and relationships in aid (see for example Eyben 2006). "

I would put in a reference to source, which would be Alfini and Chambers forthcoming. "Words Count: the changing language of British aid", Development in Practice

-----Original Message-----

From: Hywel Coleman [mailto:h.coleman@adm.leeds.ac.uk]

Sent: 18 January 2007 09:50

To: Robert Chambers

Cc: Nuru, Nejat (Ethiopia); Dee Donlan

Subject: FW: HC to 17 Chambers Publication

Robert

Further to my message earlier this week (see below), I am now sending a further slightly revised version of your paper which includes the three corrected Figures.

As before, I will be very grateful for your comments on the four small questions which I asked about your paper.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours

Hywel

From: Hywel Coleman
Sent: Mon 15/01/2007 14:04
To: Robert Chambers
Cc: Nuru, Nejat (Ethiopia)
Subject: RE: Publication

Dear Robert

Thanks for your message back in December and apologies for not responding earlier. I have been working in an area of eastern Indonesia without easy access to the internet.

I have now had a chance to edit your paper and am enclosing the most recent version. I would be very grateful if you could have a look at it and let me have any comments/changes as soon as possible. Please note in particular :

- 1) Are the figures and tables in the correct places?
- 2) A colleague in Jakarta has prepared the three figures based on your handwritten originals. Are you happy with them? (Actually, I have noticed one or two small errors in them; I will ask him to correct them.)
- 3) On page 5 of this version there is a reference to OECD 2005 but this is missing from the list of references at the end of the paper. Can you supply the details please?
- 4) I have made a number of changes which I felt were required in order to convert this from a presentation made to a live audience into a paper meant to be read by a reader. However, I think there are still a couple of awkwardnesses in this respect, e.g. the reference to bingo and the final sentence of the paper. Any thoughts on this?

If you make any changes at all, please can you highlight them in red and then return the paper to me?

I can't give you a publication date yet, I'm afraid. However, I'm currently in the UK until late March and I aim to be able to hand over the complete MS to BC Ethiopia before I return to Indonesia.

Many thanks for your collaboration.

Best wishes

Hywel

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