

# IDS Bulletin

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

Issue Editors **Stephen Thompson and Mariah Cannon**



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# Introduction: Power, Poverty, and Knowledge – Reflecting on 50 Years of Learning with Robert Chambers\*

Stephen Thompson<sup>1</sup> and Mariah Cannon<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** Robert Chambers is one of the most influential and prolific scholars to write about participation, poverty, and knowledge in development studies. His books, chapters, and papers have revolutionised the discipline, inspiring both participatory processes and more inclusive practice. Perhaps not as well known are the articles he authored for the *IDS Bulletin*. This Archive Collection explores Robert's contributions to the journal across five decades with a view to resurfacing buried gems of development studies theory and reinvigorating debates about how the sector can improve: it collates his most important articles and presents a new introduction reflecting on key ideas and offering a critical analysis of the common themes throughout Robert's work. New perspectives discuss how theories have changed over time, and the continued relevance of key ideas. The articles reproduced here show not only how Robert's thinking evolved but also hint at broader changes in strategic focus for the Institute of Development Studies itself, as well as development theory in general.

**Keywords** participatory methods, poverty, rural development, power, bias, Robert Chambers.

## 1 Introduction

Robert Chambers is recognised as a development studies champion, with his writings and his thinking continuing to inspire and provoke debate and discussion among development practitioners, activists, and academics from around the world. Since 1972, his intellectual home has been the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), based at University of Sussex, where he is a Research Associate and Emeritus Professor. We, the authors, are lucky enough to be able to call Robert our colleague as he continues to contribute to the Participation, Inclusion, and Social Change research cluster, but also our friend. As with so many IDS colleagues, co-workers from partner organisations,

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and friends over the years, our approaches have been shaped by casual conversations over a cup of tea with Robert, as well as by his written work. His many contributions to the field of development studies began not only years before we started working in the discipline, but also decades before we were born.<sup>3</sup> In wider development studies circles, he is perhaps best known for his books, which include *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers 1983), *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers 1997a) and, more recently, *Can We Know Better? Reflections for Development* (Chambers 2017). He has also published a magnitude of journal articles, academic papers, and chapters on a range of development-related topics including rural development, participatory methodologies, and poverty.

Another prominent feature of the development studies landscape (albeit in a different way) is the *IDS Bulletin*, which has been in continuous publication since 1968. Moving beyond similarities of longevity (with both having contributed to furthering development studies for over half a century), there are many other parallels between Robert's work and the *IDS Bulletin*. Both champion critical thinking on how transformations can reduce inequalities. Both remain firmly focused on those who are the most marginalised. Both have a legacy of working to ensure the voices of those often silenced or ignored can be heard. Both remain consistent in their focus and commitment to learning and doing better. Over the decades there have been moments in time where Robert and the *IDS Bulletin* have come together. Robert's first contribution to the *IDS Bulletin* came nearly 50 years ago in 1974, six years after the journal's launch in 1968. Since then, Robert has published a further 13 articles in the *IDS Bulletin*. Robert's last *IDS Bulletin* article was published in 2012 (see Chambers 2012, this *IDS Bulletin*), but he has continued in the last decade to make significant contributions to the field, publishing both books and articles in other journals.

The premise of this *IDS Bulletin* Archive Collection is to delve into Robert's contribution to the journal, to resurface buried gems of development studies scholarship and to reinvigorate debates about how we can do better – a question described by Robert as the eternal challenge of development (Chambers 1997b), and explored in more depth in his book *Can We Know Better? Reflections for Development* (Chambers 2017). As we reflected on both Robert's work and the work of others inspired by it, it became clear that this editorial introduction to the Archive Collection could not draw on the original articles alone. Therefore, where possible we have highlighted how Robert's articles have gone on to inform further thinking or debates in the field of development. We have also highlighted where Robert has expanded or consolidated his thinking himself with subsequently published work elsewhere.

We recognise that many of Robert's most prestigious contributions to the field of development have been published

elsewhere, but we believe that his *IDS Bulletin* articles represent an often-overlooked cache of his writing, from which through revisiting much can be learned. It is important to note that we did not set out to deliver a comprehensive review of all of Robert's work – a gargantuan task far beyond the scope of the current undertaking. Rather, our intention was to draw together this collection to provoke reflection on what might successful development – or 'good change' (Chambers 1997b: 1744) – look like and how it might be achieved. For those seeking broader critical reviews of Robert's influential theoretical contributions, we recommend reading *Revolutionizing Development: Reflections on the Work of Robert Chambers*, which is edited by Cornwall and Scoones (2011) and contains contributions from a range of authors including collaborators, critics, and colleagues of Robert. In addition, we urge readers to go back to the source material and explore the 'Robert Chambers Archive', available through the IDS OpenDocs repository.<sup>4</sup> This treasure trove is estimated to contain Open Access to over 70 per cent of Robert's publications on participatory development.

The eight articles included in this *IDS Bulletin* Archive Collection were written over a period spanning five decades. As such, their focus shows change over time – change in Robert's evolving interests, change in the strategic focus of IDS as a research institute, change in the wider development studies field, as well as change in the world at large. One of Robert's greatest strengths is to be ruthlessly self-critical and reflective, to move beyond past beliefs when given new information. This ability to adapt his thinking to new understandings and perspectives perhaps explains how his work has remained relevant to the field for so long.

Broadly speaking, Robert's earlier *IDS Bulletin* articles have a particular strong focus on local knowledge and rural development. Over time, this shifts first to a concern with professional development management, and second to a focus on power and participatory methods. While each article stands alone, these themes re-occur and re-emerge. Through contemporary critical analysis of this historic collection, this editorial introduction seeks to present new reflections on Robert's *IDS Bulletin* articles, organised around these enduring themes. As time marches on, it is inevitable that how these themes are conceptualised and framed will evolve. For example, if a development studies paper titled 'Managing Rural Development' (as per Chambers 1974, this *IDS Bulletin*) were to be written about Africa or Asia by a scholar from the UK in 2023, it would undoubtedly raise eyebrows. Language has of course evolved too. For example, some of the language used in relation to Indigenous Technical Knowledge (e.g. in Howes and Chambers 1979, this *IDS Bulletin*) may now make for uncomfortable reading. We have deliberately not shied away from including these articles in this Archive Collection, as they form an important part in

the development of the discourse. Our purpose in this editorial introduction is not to use a contemporary lens to expose the faults of this collection of articles, but rather to critically explore the content, with a view to highlighting where challenges persist and where progress has been made. In terms of language and concepts, we will explore what has remained constant and what has evolved. We will use Robert's articles to show how far down the road we have come as a discipline, while also offering our thoughts on the epistemological mountains we are yet to climb.

Our intention is for this Archive Collection to be a celebration of Robert's contribution in the hope that this drives further critical analysis of some of the key themes.

In the spirit of participation, learning, and reflection which have been such prominent features of Robert's scholarship, we spent some time speaking to Robert about his contribution to the *IDS Bulletin* over the years and some of the key themes that are covered in his articles. We also requested a comment from Melissa Leach and Peter Taylor on behalf of the *IDS Bulletin* Editorial Steering Group to share their reflections. The resulting articles follow this introduction. We hope you enjoy this Archive Collection as much as we enjoyed editing it.

## **2 Key themes**

### **2.1 Rural development**

Rural development has always been a central focus of Robert's work, and the *IDS Bulletin* articles included in this collection are no different. In his article 'In Search of Professionalism, Bureaucracy and Sustainable Livelihoods for the 21st Century' (this *IDS Bulletin*), a quintessential development dilemma is articulated by Robert in trying to establish ways to learn from and empower rural people, with a view to provide the conditions for more sustainable rural livelihoods (Chambers 1991). Many people who inhabit rural areas in low-income settings are resource poor and spend most of their time involved in subsistence-based work. Yet rural lives are complex and diverse – a reality that is often underperceived and underestimated by outsiders looking in. Too often, what is known about these communities is based on assessments from professional development practitioners who visit briefly. Such approaches only offer a snapshot of the lived realities of rural populations and often perpetuate preconceived notions of existence. Robert terms such fleeting visits as 'rural development tourism' (*ibid.*). In a self-validating cycle, the behaviour of those involved in such an approach pressures rural people to present themselves as ignorant and incapable, rather than show their true capacity and capability. The outsiders' normal behaviour is characterised by their confidence in the superiority of their own knowledge, which by default establishes that they have nothing to learn from rural people themselves. This error becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The strengths of including rural dwellers in development research have been explored in detail in the extensive literature to emerge on Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in the 1970s and 1980s, and the literature on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) which has evolved since. Such approaches aim to enable participants to share, enhance, and analyse their own knowledge, with a view to plan and to act (Chambers 1992b, 1994a, 1994b, 2012) (see the Participatory Methods website for more examples).<sup>5</sup> Participatory appraisal methods offer direct and engaged interaction with rural participants overcoming the constraints of rural development tourism (Chambers 1992a). Such approaches are found to surface information on complex and diverse realities in a way that more traditional 'extractive' methods of investigation simply cannot (Chambers 1991). Cornwall and Pratt (2011) built on earlier work exploring PRA, arguing that the boom associated with this approach is over, but that new debates relating to representation and voice have evolved from these antecedent debates about consultation of rural people. The 'abuse and misuse' of PRA by mainstream development institutions should be reflected upon critically as it is still relevant to understand how knowledge is generated and who participates in these processes, and importantly, who does not. Care is needed to ensure that participatory approaches to development do not result in the unjust and illegitimate exercise of power as explored in Cooke and Kothari's (2001) book *Participation: The New Tyranny?*.

In much of his writing, Robert uses ideas of contrast to draw attention to who is being left behind and why. For example, rurality is juxtaposed to urbanity (Chambers 1992a). Robert laments normal professionalism which includes dominant ideas, thinking, methods, and behaviours that favour what is urban over what is rural. He argues that such professionalism 'Values things more than people, numbers more than judgements, high technology more than low, and whatever is urban, industrial, clean and hard more than whatever is rural, agricultural, dirty and soft' (*ibid.*: 31). Robert frequently uses such dichotomies in his scholarship to draw attention to who is being left behind. For example, Robert advocates for championing bottom-up, diverse, and process-led approaches to participation, as opposed to those that are top-down, standardised, and target driven (Chambers 2006). Another example is the difference between urbanity and its professional values and rural realities which are revisited in *Can We Know Better? Reflections for Development* (Chambers 2017). Here, a number of contrasting perceptions are presented, including modern versus traditional, quantified versus unquantified, predictable versus unpredictable, rich versus poor, and influential versus powerless, among others (*ibid.*). These dichotomous characteristics map on to 'uppers' and 'lowers' – terminology developed by Robert and explained in more detail in section 2.3 below (Chambers 2006).

In the article 'Managing Rural Development' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Robert cautions against importing external development management systems into rural areas, questioning their appropriateness, their usefulness, and their potential to introduce bias (a theme which is discussed in more detail in section 2.4) (Chambers 1974). Robert regarded such systems as rigid, unwieldy, and exclusive. They were often delivered by management consultants from the urban centres who tended to come to rural areas and go again quickly, leaving behind them 'mindless rituals' of data collection which does not paint an accurate picture of reality. In typical reflective fashion, Robert questions if his own involvement in the design and testing of management procedures for use by the Government of Kenya in the 1970s was an example of the coming and going of management consultants who import inappropriate modes of operation, asking 'did we?' (*ibid.*: 10). To counter the negative impact of such an imposition, Robert urges for the 'cross-fertilisation' of appropriate social sciences with local knowledge (*ibid.*). Robert's early ideas about how appropriate knowledge must be used by rural development policymakers and planners if realistic policies and plans for rural development are to be made, are further developed by Singh (1999), who expanded on Robert's ideas to explore how a lack of knowledge about rural realities on the part of development policymakers and administrators can result in development programmes failing.

There are aspects of rural life that have changed as the world has changed. For example, the explosion in technology has brought big changes to people living in rural areas. It was only 30 years ago that Robert commented that, 'The revolution in communications is increasingly touching rural people: in some parts of the South, not just radios, but television and videos are to be found in villages' (Chambers 1992a: 31). In the early 1990s, the internet and mobile technology were in their infancy. Hernandez and Roberts (2018) describe how Robert's ideas about prioritising the poorest precede debates about access to digital technology, but the theory behind his ideas remains highly relevant. The explosive growth of digital technologies in the last three decades has enabled exciting new possibilities for social and economic development for rural populations, offering potential to increase income and employment opportunities, improved civic participation and governance, as well as enhanced provision of health care and education. However, distribution of technology is not equal, with many people in rural areas being left behind. As with so many innovations, people living outside of the urban centres are the last to benefit: 'In rural populations where cellular and broadband connectivity are not available, there is no possibility of digital dividends' (*ibid.*: 3). While aspects of rural living have changed and progressed since Robert wrote his early *IDS Bulletin* articles, the disadvantage and marginalisation many people face when living outside of urban centres persists.

## 2.2 Local knowledge and participation

Robert's early work on the importance and potential of local knowledge includes a specific focus on Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK) as a concept.<sup>6</sup> In an early *IDS Bulletin* article titled 'Indigenous Technical Knowledge: Analysis, Implications and Issues', ITK is classified in opposition to modern scientific knowledge (Howes and Chambers 1979, this *IDS Bulletin*):

The scientific mode of thought is characterised by a greater ability to break down data presented to the senses and to reassemble it in different ways. The mode of ITK, on the other hand, is 'concrete' and relies almost exclusively on intuition and evidence directly available to the senses.  
(*ibid.*: 5)

With both scientific knowledge and ITK, process (or how what is known is arrived at) is important. Robert made significant contributions to early discussions on how the processual nature of knowledge production must be considered in its analysis, in the same way that the situational nature must also be considered (*ibid.*).

Robert's ideas about the importance of local knowledge were developed in detail in his book *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers 1983). Here, he discusses the various terminology used to explore local knowledge and related terms, including ITK, rural people's knowledge, and ethnoscience. All have challenges associated with them in terms of taxonomy, but are united in referring to grass-roots understandings, which are regularly discounted in comparison to modern scientific knowledge, often due to the attitudes and behaviour of outsiders. Power, professionalism, prestige, lack of contact, language difference, and prejudice are all barriers that may prevent outsiders from learning from local knowledge.

By the 1990s, Robert reported a shift in how local knowledge and ITK was accepted and increasingly used by development professionals. This shift was manifested by a noted increase in literature that focused on (or at least valued) local knowledge (Chambers 1992a). Change was recognised as slow, but progress was being made. The theoretical argument about the essentiality of considering local knowledge in development programmes and processes had largely been won, and its usage is now a key part of the rhetoric and practice of development practice and research (Smith 2011). For example, expanding on Robert's *IDS Bulletin* article on ITK (Howes and Chambers 1979) as well as a book on the same topic by Brokensha, Warren and Werner (1980), Agrawal (1995) states that development which does not consider people's knowledge is bound to fail. However, it is argued that the 'sterile dichotomy' between indigenous and Western, or traditional and scientific knowledge, can be harmful to addressing the needs of the most marginalised (*ibid.*).

While progress has been made, we have yet to reach the promised land characterised by development informed and influenced by local knowledge, as challenges to operationalisation and engagement remain. Smith states that 'The overwhelmingly positive reception of "local knowledge" into development practice has unhelpfully romanticised such knowledges, and in some cases "hidden" behind the rhetoric a lack of engagement in practice' (2011: 605). Debate relating to how the knowledge generated by those on the fringes can be included and operationalised in development processes continues. Central to these debates was the premise that while local knowledge was now accepted as a keystone for successful development interventions, caution was needed to avoid regarding it as a resource to be mined or extracted. Local knowledge is at risk of being colonised, resulting in it being un/under-represented or ignored in research outputs (Igwe, Madichie and Rugara 2022). For development work to be meaningful and inclusive, local understandings must form an indispensable feature of how knowledge is co-constructed to progress beyond one-sided extractive research. Ways of knowing must be developed based on partnership and collaboration in research (Chambers 2012, this *IDS Bulletin*). Focusing on developing methodologies, mindsets, and the multidimensionality of poverty research, Robert commented:

The question to ask, then, and repeatedly, is whose research is it? Conducted by whom? For whom? And if the answer is 'our' research, for 'us' to benefit 'them', it can always be asked – are there ways 'they' could conduct the research or more of it, learn from and own the outcomes, and be empowered to act on them?  
(Chambers 2007a: 32)

The importance of local knowledge continues to interest Robert, and this theme was central to his recent book *Can We Know Better? Reflections for Development*, where he commented, 'Only people themselves have expert knowledge of the complexities they experience' (Chambers 2017: 191). He goes on to assert that to learn about these realities in an inclusive way, participatory approaches are fundamental. These ideas have been influential across a range of development-related fields. By way of an example, Mohamed and Ventura (2000) drew on Robert's ideas to use participatory geomatics to document indigenous tenure systems.

While some of the language has progressed, the provocations regarding the importance of local knowledge remain as relevant as ever (Howes and Chambers 1979). For example, with the continued strengthening of university systems in low-income countries, there has been a resurgence in interest in local knowledge, with increased recognition that interactions between university students and staff with local communities

can result in highly beneficial multidirectional flows of knowledge, further developing what we know about the world (Mbah 2019; Thompson *et al.* 2022). If we want to develop an honest and meaningful understanding of the world and how people live in it, we must be prepared to recognise imbalances in how knowledge is valued and think of ways we can address them so we can continue to learn.

In his early exploration of participatory methods written nearly 40 years ago, Robert hinted that local knowledge would be essential for gaining a deeper understanding of climate and the environments we live in (Chambers 1983). In the 1980s, the significance of the damage that humans were inflicting on the earth was scarcely discussed in the mainstream, yet today these reflections on the usefulness of local knowledge may assist us to address the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced. Inspired in part by Robert's work, ideas relating to the relevance of participatory methods and local knowledge to address climate change have been progressed by Reid *et al.* (2009), Loo (2014), as well as van Aalst, Cannon and Burton (2008), among others.

### 2.3 Power

Power is a concept that has been central to Robert's work from the early days up until the present. In his influential *IDS Bulletin* article 'Transforming Power: From Zero-Sum to Win-Win?' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Robert explored power dynamics through the development of the terminology of 'uppers' and 'lowers' – a nomenclature he credits to discussions with his wife, Jenny (Chambers 2006).

Upper can refer to a person who in a context is dominant or superior to a lower in that context. Lower can refer to a person who in a context is subordinate or inferior to an upper in that same context.  
(*ibid.*: 99)

This use of simple and accessible language to make sense of a phenomenon riddled with complexity and nuance exemplifies what Robert does best and goes a long way to explain why his work has remained consistently popular and relevant with development practitioners for over half a century.

In the *IDS Bulletin* article 'All Power Deceives' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Robert argues that inequities in power can be found throughout the world: 'Human society can be seen as patterned by hierarchies of power and weakness, of dominance and subordination' (Chambers 1994a: 18). Much of Robert's writing on power has served to illuminate how the realities of the powerful dominate development discourse (Chambers 1997b). Developing this line of thought further, in his 2005 book *Ideas for Development*, Robert argues that power and relationships are at the core of development, yet these concepts are often

overlooked. The following analogy presents a simplicity to the debate: 'Considering development without power and relationships is like analysing irrigation without considering water and its distribution' (Chambers 2005: 485).

Unequal power relations in development can be redressed through affirmative action on the part of the powerful. Robert urged those who are in positions of power to take action to empower others who are not (Chambers 1994a). This can be done by stepping down, keeping their ego in check, and working to decentralise decision-making. In addition, spending time/sharing space with people who are disempowered may also provide clarity and fresh perspectives. According to Robert, the result is that 'New and more practical realities can be expressed and shared; and it is through empowering the poor, vulnerable and weak, that their reality will count more, and equity will be better served' (*ibid.*: 26). By transforming power relations and reversing what is regarded as common and normal, good change can be achieved (Chambers 2006).

Such transitions are often easier said than done. Robert recognises that powerful people do not readily relinquish power (Chambers 1988). Examples of this can be found at every level of hierarchy, with those who have control being reluctant to give it up. Resistance to transformative change that addresses power dilemmas is in part caused by ego. Robert argues that 'It is not (yet) the norm for powerful people to willingly admit and parade their mistakes. Instead, to protect their egos and their jobs, they persist through habit, obstinacy and pride, in mistaken beliefs and practices' (Chambers 1994a: 18). These ideas were expanded upon in a paper focused on knowledge and power by Davies (1994), who wrote that 'The powerful (be they countries, institutions or individuals) are always better able to use knowledge to reinforce their position of dominance over the weak, albeit via a self-sustaining system of self-deception and misinformation' (*ibid.*: 9).

Robert's ideas on power and development have contributed to robust debates in development studies over the years, which have grown in prominence in recent decades. The influence and impact of Robert's propositions on power are clear to see. Directly this impact is evident through his contribution (Chambers 2006) to the special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on power, edited by Eyben, Harris and Pettit (2006). Indirectly, his influence has been acknowledged by a host of authors theorising about power. For example, Cornwall (2016) acknowledges Robert's ideas on a 'pedagogy of the non-oppressed' (which were inspired by Freire's (1972) 'pedagogy of the oppressed') as a source of inspiration for her call for a pedagogy for the powerful. Robert's call to shift away from a 'zero-sum logic' (Chambers 2006) also inspired Pantazidou (2012) to explore positions of power and articulate the necessity to think about where power lies in different contexts and settings. Robert's exploration of the necessity to

use 'power to empower' also progressed debates around how transformative change might be achieved (Chambers 2006). For example, the idea of uppers and lowers was found by Green (2008) to be applicable to numerous aspects of poverty based on power dynamics relating to gender, ethnicity, and class. Despite his work having contributed significantly to the scholarship on power and development studies, missed opportunities to bring power into the development conversation have also been highlighted. For example, in an *IDS Bulletin* issue edited by Robert on indigenous knowledge and development (see Chambers (1979) for the editorial article), the analysis of knowledge through a power lens was missing (Pantazidou and Gaventa 2016). Given Robert's increasing interest in power in his later articles, it could be argued that had the issue been written at a later time, power may have been a central feature.

#### 2.4 Bias

Bias or unfairness in the development sphere is another major concern which is found to emerge throughout Robert's *IDS Bulletin* articles. This concern is found to stem from injustice relating to how marginalised people are represented in research due to inaccurate findings that often result from flawed approaches to gathering evidence. For example, in the article 'Bureaucratic Reversals and Local Diversity' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Robert argues that management systems involved in development are often predisposed to serving management, rather than to serve the people (Chambers 1988). These ideas inspired the work of Fitzgerald (1990), who went on to explain that 'normal bureaucracy' in the development sector fails to acknowledge the diverse and complex lives that people have and that this can result in the 'normal professionalism' neglecting priorities of the poor.

In another *IDS Bulletin* article titled 'The Self-Deceiving State' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Robert bemoans how 'Normal government development bureaucracy appears resiliently static, robustly buffered against change', despite the growing interest at the time in adaptive and iterative rather than linear processes (Chambers 1992a: 31). Such approaches to development tend to be overly bureaucratic, top-down, standardised, and driven by supply. Realities can be distorted by false positive feedback, due to misperceptions and misinformation. Robert argues that such false positive feedback is mediated in five main ways: misreporting, selected perception, methods which mislead, diplomacy and prudence, and defences against dissonance (*ibid.*). All of these development challenges can contribute to creating and perpetuating bias. These ideas have since inspired a range of enquiries into how biases may play out in reality. For example, Zwarteveen (2008) builds on Robert's proposition of normal professionalism to investigate how the concept could be associated with masculinity when considering water resources (Chambers 1992a). Biases may become normalised, and are viewed as unchangeable, and even neutral.

Bureaucratic systems involved with development tend to be hierarchical, centralised, standardised, and regulated. Associated time horizons are equally as restrictive, usually being short and often informed by arbitrary targets. Those responsible for making policy decisions are frequently ageing men, based in large urban centres, whose knowledge and experience of rural areas are often non-existent, biased, and out-of-date (Chambers 1991). This paints the picture of a top-down development system, which if left unchecked will result in the production of evidence that fails to represent the experiences of many marginalised people, including those living in rural areas. To overcome the challenges that the attitudes and behaviours linked to development professionalism and bureaucracy bring, Robert called for a paradigm shift to ensure methods selected to deliver decentralisation, diversity, and democracy (*ibid.*). This approach is needed not just to address research bias, but also in development professionals' personal values and behaviour.

In the *IDS Bulletin* article 'All Power Deceives' (this *IDS Bulletin*), Robert discusses the challenges of systems of power and misinformation (Chambers 1994a). Feedback channels can mislead with information which exaggerates good performance, resulting in self-sustaining development myths. Rural development tourism can introduce bias as 'better' areas are preferred and 'model' projects selected. Rigid questionnaire surveys designed to reinforce preconceived notions of what is needed can massage and manufacture realities. Development professionals here are part of the challenge as they have allowed themselves to be deceived by unrepresentative or flawed evidence. These ideas on bias in the development industry are expanded further by Crocker (2007), who explores participation in local, grass-roots, or micro-development initiatives.

Being optimistic (which Robert frequently is in his writing), he argues that the same professionals have the potential to be part of the solution (Chambers 1994a). To achieve this, those other than development professionals must be empowered, enabling more practical realities to be expressed and shared. Approaches that empower the most marginalised will result in greater recognition and appreciation of their reality, through which equity will be better served. The role of the development professional in shaping development agendas was something that Robert went on to explore in depth. The lack of enquiry about how personal influence could determine development is something that puzzled Robert. Writing about this potential source of bias, Robert explained,

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.  
(Chambers 2007b: 127)

As already noted above, scientific knowledge is prioritised at the expense of the local knowledge which is 'ignored and squeezed out as inferior' (Howes and Chambers 1979: 6). This can result in bias and the irreversible loss of knowledge. However, despite his strong views on bias, Robert's musings present him as a realist. There is a recognition that as humans, we all have predispositions. He is open and transparent about his own biases towards participatory methods (Chambers 2012). Reflexivity about the existence of biases and what these might mean for how we approach development dilemmas is a first step towards rectifying imbalances. To ensure that preconceptions and biases do not result in the perpetuation of misinformation, a diversity of views should be sought, enabling collective progress towards identifying different solutions to vexing problems (Chambers 2006).

### 3 Conclusion

This editorial introduction has given a brief overview to Robert's contributions to the *IDS Bulletin*, which span over half a century. Central themes of rural development, local knowledge and participatory methods, power, and bias are explored. This collection of articles illustrates Robert's evolving interests at different points in his career, but also how fashions in development studies more generally have ebbed and flowed over time. As editors, we have thoroughly enjoyed exploring this collection of articles, and comparing and contrasting the themes within them to current debates within development studies.

We must finish with a caveat that this collection of articles is only really the tip of a scholarly iceberg – we strongly recommend reading further and deeper into the literature on all the key themes covered within this issue. For those already familiar with Robert's research, we hope this Archive Collection provides fresh insight into his theories and thinking. We hope to energise a rallying call for participatory development which remains pertinent as many development challenges of the last five decades persist. For those who are less familiar with Robert's work, we hope that this issue offers a springboard allowing you to dive into some of most influential development studies material of our time and immerse yourself in a participatory way of thinking. Come on in, the water is lovely.

### Notes

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- 1 Stephen Thompson, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 Mariah Cannon, Research Officer, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 As per McKay (2004: 47) 'The genesis of modern development thought in the West is usually dated to the end of the Second World War'.
- 4 The Robert Chambers Archive is available Open Access through the **IDS OpenDocs repository**.
- 5 **Participatory Methods website**.
- 6 For a deeper dive into this term 'Indigenous Technical Knowledge' and how it compares and contrasts to other forms of knowledge, we recommend reading *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, where Chambers (1983) highlights the importance of the 'indigenous' and 'technical' aspects of the term, with the former implying originating or being naturally produced from a particular area, and the latter emphasising its practical nature.

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