

--between the lines--

Ep 01: Can We Know better? Reflections for Development - Robert Chambers

Welcome to *Between the Lines*, a monthly podcast that explores books for a better world, brought to you by the Institute of Development Studies. Good books have the ability to change our perspective on the world. In this month's episode of *Between the Lines*, IDS Professor, Robert Chambers, talks about his book, *Can We Know Better? Reflections for Development*. Drawing on almost 60 years of relentless questioning of social processes and power relations and standing up for those often left behind, Robert argues that to do better, we need to *know* better. He also explains how having been a lousy manager led him to lead with love. Interviewing Robert, his friend and colleague, Tessa Lewin.

TESSA LEWIN: I'm here with Robert Chambers, he is a research associate at the Institute of Development Studies, and he's been here since 1969, which is quite impressive, and he tells me that prior to being at IDS he was a failed manager of rural development. And this fact is quite important in, I think, understanding the arguments in your book, Robert? And . . .

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes.

TESSA LEWIN: . . . I imagine as a motivating factor behind much of your writing? Do you want to talk about a bit about your failure as a manager? (*laughs*)

ROBERT CHAMBERS: No, no, I'd be very happy. And I think it's important, because I'm not being at all holier-than-thou in writing this book. I was a district officer in Kenya, just before independence, a thrilling time to be there, but I was working among pastoral people, and my approach was very top-down, I was very ignorant, I had a good degree and I thought I was the bee's knees. And that was a disability that I never recognised at the time. And later, then I was a trainer of Kenyans to take over, and then after that I became a researcher, and when I was doing the research with a very good friend who's now passed on, John Morris, we did research on the same settlement scheme in Kenya. And at one point he said to me, 'You know, Robert, whenever there's any difference of opinion, you always take the side of the management.' And I've never forgotten that. It went very deep. And this guy, John Morris, he did a study of women on the scheme. And the reality of women was very different from what was perceived by the management of the scheme. And that was an education for me.

TESSA LEWIN: There are six chapters in the book, and I'm sure Robert will correct me on this, or we'll discuss it in more detail later, but my reading of it is that the first chapters are, well, they're titled, *Error and myth; Biases and*

blind spots; and Lenses and lock-ins. And very broadly, they're about what we've done wrong as a development profession. And the second half of the book is about the different criteria that we need, and redefining how we look at development, is that a fair characterisation, Robert?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, it's fair. The first three chapters are about getting things wrong, or missing things, or mis-learning – or not learning well. And the last three chapters are about trying to explore how we can do better.

TESSA LEWIN: And perhaps I can start by asking you about . . . I felt when I was reading the book, I felt that it was . . . bits of it were . . . well you talk about the brain and the left brain and the right brain, and this distinction between how you approach *things* and how you approach *people*, and they're very different. And I felt, particularly in the second half of the book, that you were quite defensive in that your audience was one that you expected to have to persuade not to be rational.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: (*laughs*)

TESSA LEWIN: . . . and to see things differently and be more open to creativity, to complexity, to chaos, to a different way of approaching development, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about these two paradigms that kind of run through the book, really?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, well, they're fairly fundamental. The left hemisphere of the brain, which connects with the right hand, which is to do with *things*, which links in with predictability, controllability, linear processes, statistics, a lot that goes with the scientific method. And the right hemisphere of the brain links with the left hand, which is more creative, more flexible, more adaptive, much involved with complexity, and with unpredictability and with adapting continuously and learning continuously, in situations which are unfolding – but are not as controllable as the things on the 'things' paradigm. Maybe I should say what I mean by 'paradigm', because I've got my own definition of 'paradigm', and I've never found anybody who shares it. (*laughs*) Although I hope, I very much hope there are people who share it. But my definition of 'paradigm' is there are six things which are all interlinked and which can either cluster on the 'things' side, or they can cluster on the 'people' side – the unpredictable, the complexity side. One is concepts. The second one is values and principles. The third one is methods and processes. The fourth is roles, behaviours, attitudes. The fifth is relationships. And in the middle of all this, linked with all of them is mindsets, which is to do with how we perceive things, and how we frame things, and how we think – which, of course, varies between people and between context. So, what I'm suggesting is that there's a cluster of these, on the side of 'things', physical side. And some people talk in the sciences, and particularly psychology, about physics and economics, about 'physics envy', (*laughs*) that's to say that other professions, they all feel slightly inferior, unless they can count things, and be precise according to that paradigm. And this is one of the troubles with our time. And this is quite beyond development as well, is that that side, the scientific side has taken over and colonised areas of learning which it should

not have colonised, which need reclaiming, where the complexity and unpredictability are the norm.

TESSA LEWIN: Can we go back to the discussion about audience, and who you had in mind? I guess, who do you write for generally, because you've written a number of books?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: I try to write reasonably excessively, so that I try not to use jargon, but when I do use jargon, I define it at the end of the book. And I've been doing that with all recent books, having definitions. And I think that's important, and I wish more people would do it. And the audience is very general. I list it at the beginning, it's particularly people who would call themselves professionals. And these can be people working in aid agencies, or they can be academics, they can be consultants, they can be people in a whole range of different disciplines. I'm not focusing only on . . . you know, with a narrow searchlight, pointing at one group.

TESSA LEWIN: Although one could argue that your audience is your former self?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: (*laughs*) That's a thought . . .

TESSA LEWIN: (*laughs*) The failed manager of rural development!

ROBERT CHAMBERS: . . . which I shall have to brood over later.

TESSA LEWIN: (*laughs*) Can we talk a bit about how you conceptualise development now, because that's also a long theme throughout the book, is this kind of massive move from imagining that development is based in the developing world and how that's changed, not only within development, but also within your own practice.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, I . . . my definition of development is a bit of an escape, it's, quote, 'good change' unquote. So the question is then, 'What's good?' Which throws one back on values and whose values, and what change is significant. But, the reason for having that definition is to throw people back and say, effectively, 'Define it for yourself.'

TESSA LEWIN: And how does that work, given predisposition to bias and . . .

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes.

TESSA LEWIN: . . . error, and . . . I mean, it's a bit of a recursive?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, well, in the last chapter, and at one or two other points, particularly in the Chapter 4, which is about rigour for complexity, I talk about – and here's a jargon word – 'reflexivity', and what I mean by reflexivity is holding a mirror up to yourself, and the way in which you learn what you see, what you don't see, how you categorise things, what your

values are, and how this affects your whole mindset. So I think reflexivity is very, very important.

TESSA LEWIN: You seem always, Robert, very . . . kind of relentlessly positive.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes.

TESSA LEWIN: And open and enthusiastic, despite being very critical. And yeah, I wonder what it is that drives you really?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: (*laughs*)

TESSA LEWIN: And has that changed?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: I don't know whether it's changed, its . . . you might call it . . . it's a rather pretentious . . . [*words unclear*] to say that it's *matured*, but it's something which has developed. I have a strong tendency to look for win-win solutions. And I think that academic critics, in particular, miss a lot of tricks because they reward one another, academics tend to reward one another, for being critical. There are development institutions in the UK, I won't name them, which tend to have a very critical culture. And students who come out to feel a bit disillusioned by the fact that there isn't more that's positive. But there are very, very strong win-wins which are possible. For instance, if you take, just to pick one out of the air, participatory statistics, which is one of the approaches that I advocate in the book. With participative statistics, everybody wins, because the people who generate the statistics learn about their reality, and the people who are involved from outside the community or whoever the people are who are taking part, they learn but they learn much better, because the reality and the categories and the indicators and so on, which are being used, are those of the people themselves, so it's their reality. So, this is a really strong win-win. But it's not normal professionalism, at all, anywhere, in any discipline. And it's very, very disappointing that it hasn't been taken on more, because we've known about it for over twenty years. We've known about its extraordinary power for over twenty years, but it simply doesn't get picked up. And one of the things that I still don't fully understand, but I think we need to learn about is *why* – what is it that makes academics, researchers, so conservative in terms of approaches and methods.

TESSA LEWIN: Do you think that's shifted at all, and do you have any theories as to why it might be?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: It's . . . it has shifted, a bit, but not very much. And what happens – and there's an example quoted in the book, about participatory impact analysis, that's in Chapter 4 – there's an example there, which was very, very cost-effective, and it was funded by the Gates Foundation and by IFAD, and it was a very, very difficult piece of evaluation. In my sites, many interventions, many impacts, all that, but it was done in participatory way, and of the budget which came from those two

organisations, a whole third of that budget went on developing the methodology. And having developed it, then it was relatively straightforward, but it was very participatory all the way through. So everybody gained, but it gained because the funding agencies were prepared to wait, to be patient, and to invest a lot of money upfront in developing the approach. I think that's the way for the future, but it depends on the funding agencies.

TESSA LEWIN: You talk in the book about time frames, and time scales, and that being a significant decider on the success of a development project, and the push towards tighter, shorter delivery time frames? I wonder if you could say a bit more about that?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: I think there are two sides to this: one is that with a lot of interventions it takes really quite a long time before there's any impact that can be measured. And the other side of it is that there are situations in which what is needed is very, very rapid learning and feedback. And this is why one of the criteria of rigour for complexity is rapid feedback – it's timeliness. Timeliness is not a criterion of rigour, on the 'things' side. It should be one of the criteria for rigour on the 'people' side.

TESSA LEWIN: So an agility? I've thought about this a lot, actually, in the way we are so much about logframes and measurement and restrictions that you can't . . . you can't make agile decisions, you can't be responsive or opportunistic, because the spaces to do that have closed up so much. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the first chapter of the book, on *Error and myth*.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: I'd be delighted to, because it contains some things which are common sense, but substantiated with evidence, which I think have not been put together properly before, so that we've not been fully aware of them. And to take some examples: very often, when something doesn't work well, it gets swept under the carpet. When there are top-down targets, and people are regarded well if they achieve those targets, the reporting tends to be inaccurate and exaggerated and blown up. There's evidence of these. There's a tendency to marginalise heresies of any sort. Heresies are not always right, but I've given some examples where heresies have been right and they've been swept under the carpet.

TESSA LEWIN: Such as?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Well, I mean, the System of Rice Intensification which has been adopted now by *millions* of farmers, with considerable increases in rice production, in the main rice-producing countries, which was rubbished by the International Rice Research Institute for years, and denied. And there were erudite, refereed journal articles which rubbished it, but it worked. And one of the reasons there was that the person promoting it, Norman Uphoff is a political scientist. 'Oh no! You can't let a political scientist muscle in on our territory, in this sort of way.' But it was successful. Other things are repetition: once an error is repeated, particularly statistics, they get repeated and they get embedded, and they get believed. And nowadays, and

even worse thing is the way in which PowerPoint perpetuates error. I give an example in the book of PowerPoint which has gone on being used for about ten years, after the research on which it was based has been shown to be really very, very inadequate and misleading. So, repetition and university teachers and people like myself running workshops, if we're repeating the same thing several times, we come to believe it. And I cite in the book how I've discovered that something that I was . . . some numbers that I was giving were simply not true. I was appalled to have discovered this.

TESSA LEWIN: Yeah, I mean, I guess this is why, when you are doing your doctorate, people are so insistent that you have to go back to the original text, because it's such a common error, it's kind of . . .

ROBERT CHAMBERS: (*laughs*) Yes . . .

TESSA LEWIN: . . . Chinese whispers by academia, that you . . . you take a statistic or some little factoid . . .

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, yes.

TESSA LEWIN: . . . and then it kind of perpetuates itself, and spreads.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: And I mean, there are examples which I quote in the book about the fallibility of memory. We reinvent our past, we reinvent the past to present ourselves in a good light. I know I do this. And it's (*laughs*) upset other people, and they've told me, which has been very good for me. That goes on. Other research – the Hawthorne Effect, the famous Hawthorne Effect, which we tend to quote, that if you're observing people then they'll go on performing better and better, simply because you're taking notice of them. I mean, I oversimplify it, but that's more or less . . . It's . . . it's been exposed, in a book, which again I cite, as being unfounded, in fact. The findings of the actual research were pretty much the opposite.

TESSA LEWIN: And the end of this chapter you have, as with all the other chapters, you have some action points, as in how can we overcome these difficult aspects of our personality and . . .

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes.

TESSA LEWIN: . . . could you talk a little bit about how you envisage these insights being practically useful?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: My hope is that people will look at this – I call it an agenda, which in its original Latin sense of things that ought to be done. So, it's a checklist of questions which any reader, myself, anybody, can go through and think about and be reflexive about. It's trying to go beyond just learning, I mean, 'How can we know better?' But it's actually, 'How can we *do* better?' – How can we do better at *knowing*, and how can doing better at knowing mean that we do better, when we're using, in the practical world what we have learnt?

TESSA LEWIN: Can you give some other examples, you talked about participatory statistics, you also talk about immersions . . .

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, yes, certainly . . .

TESSA LEWIN: . . . as a positive example, I guess, of development practice.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Yes, well, this fits in with the Reality Check Approach, which has been spreading. And the idea here is that if you, as an outsider or as a researcher, if you stay in a community with a family and to some extent become a part of that family, you do things with the family, but you actually *stay* there and you sleep there, and you chat with people, instead of having a questionnaire, you just have conversations, and you walk around and you observe things – this is a very, very effective antidote to the biases of the normal sort of visits that we indulge in. And this has been systematised in the Reality Check Approach, which someone called Dee Jupp has pioneered, and been used in many countries now. Well, at least eight countries have used this, and different organisations.

TESSA LEWIN: It strikes me that this kind of very open, agile approach that you're advocating relies a lot on trust, and that's part of the problem, right, where there's competitive bidding and there's a kind of alienation between donors and practitioners, if you like?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: I'm very glad you raised this, because 'trust' is a word which you don't hear very much, at least, you don't hear it on the donor side, if we're thinking about aid agencies. Or, indeed, on the government side. Governments in any country, it's not a word that's used very much, and yet it's very, very important. And if people are going to do their best, they have to be trusted, but they also have to be given flexibility. And obviously, you have to have proper accounting, you have to avoid corruption. But there are many, many people who are capable of doing better than they are doing, if they were only trusted and given resources and told to get on with it – with a lot of reporting back, of course, and a lot of learning – but I think they would learn better and *do* better if they were trusted.

TESSA LEWIN: Which leads quite nicely into another word that is in the closure of your book in a way, which is 'love', and is another one that's not very often found in the development setting, and certainly on the donor side. And I wonder if you could just talk about how you end?

ROBERT CHAMBERS: Well, one of the most astonishing things which I've learnt in recent years is an organisation called Kyocera, which is a high-tech company, which was founded on the basis of love and empathy, and with a motto which was about respecting people within the organisation. It's been highly successful with high-tech activities, over 200, internationally – very successful. Kyocera – you can Google for it, and you can find it all. But Martin Luther King is very good on this, so let me read you something that he said.

And this is about power and love. He said, 'Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.' It's a very moving, and I think, insightful and important statement, from Martin Luther King. And so yes, I end with the theme of love, because I think this is the way forward, it's to do with how we behave, how we relate to one another, and about process. So much that's in this book is about process and about open-endedness and empathy and understanding other people, reflexivity. All of these characteristics, these . . . they hang together, and they point the finger, much more than we've had it pointed in the past, towards the personal dimension in development. And I'm using 'development' to cover all countries now. The personal dimension has been neglected, compared with learning, with academic qualifications. We need universities, we need institutions, training institutions, research institutions, which pay much more attention to the personal, to personal reflexivity, to personal actions and behaviour and to love.