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Council Expert in 2000, and the author’s key involvement in the KP and in the DDI allow for highly insightful personal anecdotes throughout the book. For example, the reader gets a behind the scenes look at how informal coffee breaks offered breakthroughs not possible in the formal diplomatic meeting rooms of the Kimberley meetings or how negotiations were held up due to petty bureaucratic disagreement over whether to use A4 or 8 ½ in x 11 in paper for KP certificates. Helpful too are the selected readings suggested at the end of the book. Still, academic readers in particular may have welcomed a more thorough integration of existing research on conflict diamonds and the Kimberley Process and of relevant studies on the resource-based human security and development challenges more generally. Without a discussion of the empirical and theoretical literature the focus of the book is on the hows rather than whys and remains largely descriptive in its analysis. Still, the breath and insider perspectives are clear strong points of the book, taking the reader on a highly informative diamond journey. As such, it is a timely and encompassing book well worth the read for anyone interested to learn more about the socio-economic complexities of the global diamond trade.

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The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor
William Easterly

Aid on the Edge of Chaos. Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World
Ben Ramalingham

There is a growing trend in current transatlantic (by which I mean British and American) development research and debate to admit the hubris of the development endeavour to date. Since around the turn of the century, researchers associated with major donor organisations finally began listening to what their supposed ‘beneficiaries’ had been saying for decades; that is, you don’t know all the answers, development is more complex than your blueprints for progress imply, please listen more.

Although they have different backgrounds, Bill Easterly and Ben Ramalingam have both published books which can be located in this welcome area. Bill Easterly is the better known of the writers, having made his name criticising the aid project, fairly convincingly in my view. In The Tyranny of Experts he takes his aversion to the ‘planners’ to a new level. Technocrats who think they have all the answers are, for Easterly, the main root of the problem.

Easterly’s argument, backed up in his own admission as much by anecdote as evidence, is that centrally planned development programmes are less likely to lead to actual development progress than efforts to increase individual liberty. Actually, he thinks they will lead to the opposite: heavy-handed and often violent repression of progressive instincts.

The best parts of the book are profound and convincing. He reminds us that ‘development’ emerged as a concept at a time, in the first half of the twentieth century, when racism was the norm in Washington and London. The idea that ‘we know what is best for them’ was simply a given, and although racism is less acceptable today, the arrogance of development experts turning up with answers to which locals should adhere is, unfortunately, still fairly common practice.

Meanwhile, Easterly’s analysis and vindication of Hayek and Smith as the messiahs of free thinking is thoroughly readable; this reviewer, at least, was left with a much enriched impression of both. Building on history as much as economic theory, Easterly shows how innovation occurs, and why it is the cornerstone of development progress. Foster innovation and freedom of spirit, he argues, and you will give development its best shot. He is, provocatively, in favour of the world’s currently massive population, because the more people there are the more innovation there is likely to be.

Most powerfully, perhaps, he questions the very idea that certain policies or politicians (he has a particular aversion to autocrats, quite understandably) are responsible for economic growth, a phenomenon he insists no-one really understands and which tends to return to mean over time, regardless of development plans and strategies. He also argues that, given this uncertainty, the burden of proof should be on those who would undermine individual rights in the name of development; an attitude he takes as oxymoronic.

This is the most powerful argument in his book, both logically and morally, but it is also where his argument begins to overreach itself. In criticising the World Bank in particular for the development policies it foisted on unsuspecting countries (or more accurately, complicit national leaders), he criticises not the content of those plans, but the very idea of having a plan at all. While he doesn’t mention him by name, you know he has his nemesis
Jeffrey Sachs in mind as he criticises the Gates Foundation and other mega international efforts to improve health and reduce poverty.

His argument departs not only from logic (if a plan doesn’t work, it doesn’t follow that you shouldn’t have a plan, but that you should have a different one) but also from the evidence. Some of the greatest gains in international poverty reduction have taken place in the last 15 years, a period characterised perhaps more than any other in history by global partnerships for change, supported by all sectors of society. We are asked to believe that this is a coincidence, or indeed that progress has occurred in spite of, rather than because of, such efforts.

In fact, in one rather surprising passage, he questions whether the remarkable progress on child mortality most people believe has taken place in Ethiopia in the last couple of decades really has taken place. It seems too complex a proposition for Easterly that under a particular autocrat, in this case Meles Zenawi, a country can experience both progress and violence at one and the same time. But this is the nature of almost all development stories, anywhere in the world, and one of the reasons why it is so hard to posit a coherent theory of ‘development’. Easterly, like many academics, prefers to fit evidence into his grand theme rather than just accept that life is complicated. Ironically, while preaching humility in what we claim to know about development, in the end he himself is guilty of over-claiming.

Ben Ramalingam does not make that mistake in Aid on the Edge of Chaos. He is a leading proponent of the growing movement to acknowledge the complexity of development, both at the macro level, which is where Easterly mainly operates, and at the project level, which is Ramalingam’s central focus.

Ramalingam’s thesis is altogether more successfully conveyed, in part because its scope is smaller, and in part because he hammers the point home in an organised and relentless assault of anecdote and information. His book is in three parts. First, he analyses ‘the way aid works’, drawing on by now fairly well-established analyses and critiques. In Part 2 he introduces complexity theory in an erudite, fascinating, but pretty long-winded manner. Ramalingam has a tendency to use three examples where one will do; if the book had been half as long it might have been twice as good. I went away totally convinced by the relevance and power of complexity theory, but also somewhat overwhelmed.

It is in Part 3 that Ramalingam links aid and complexity, setting out a vision for the way aid could work. He argues for more learning, adapting, listening, and networks. Replete with encouraging examples of what has worked in aid, his fundamental argument is that aid should, in his words shift from external push — filling gaps in a predictable and linear fashion — to internal catalyst. Catalytic aid would not create development, but it would identify, expand, and sustain the space for change in the face of complex realities. It is a powerful message.

While I welcome the content of Ramalingam’s book, I am less enamoured with the way it is presented as new and revealing; a cover-reviewer claims the book ‘catapults development thinking into the 21st century’ (Zolli 2013). What Ramalingam does do is offer impressive academic depth to back up what is actually a well-known and, dare I say, obvious proposition: that success in development cooperation is a much more complex issue than many so-called development experts have previously thought, and that it defies simple pre-cooked approaches. In that sense he does what Matt Andrews and his colleagues have done for another equally obvious and related idea: that when you bring blueprint answers to institutional reform you are unlikely to succeed (Andrews, 2014). Ramalingam refers to Andrews’ Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation approach, which the layman might know better simply as ‘learning by doing’; hardly a new idea, as Andrews acknowledges, but one that has benefited from being thought through by social scientists and is still certainly worthy of ramming home at the major development agencies.

But these ideas have been around for many decades. Ramalingam mentions Kenneth Arrow a couple of times, but Easterly offers the best quote: ‘The notion that through the workings of an entire system effects may be very different from, or even opposed to, intentions is surely the most important intellectual contribution that economic thought has made to the general understanding of social processes’ (Arrow, 1983, p. 33, quoted in Easterly). This central insight about the importance of iteration over blueprints, while couched in the language of the new science of complexity, is the common insight of many of the recipients of aid over the last 50 years, and this could have been better acknowledged by Ramalingam.

The major flaw with both Easterly and Ramalingam’s books is their integration of politics and power. While both certainly discuss politics, for both development failure is a problem that can be overcome by arriving at the right technical solution by a process of innovation (Easterly) or iteration (Ramalingam). But the major cause of stagnation and development failure is not poor technique but questions of power: powerful and wealthy parts of society (sometimes known as ‘elites’ – see for instance Kelsall’s (2013) work as part of the Africa Power and Politics programme, or, very different, Eduardo Galeano’s (1971) classic elaboration of dependency theory in Open Veins of Latin America – simply do not wish to trade their advantages for greater equality of opportunity, however much iterative problem solving, creativity, and innovation is encouraged. This is as true in rich countries as poor. Has the US health system failed to reform because of a failure to learn iteratively? Or does it have more to do with vested interests?

The task of those interested in ending poverty and creating a fairer world is not only to develop better technical solutions but also to build the power of the poorest to take on those that keep them poor. Neither Easterly nor
Ramalingam appear to get this. Easterly, for instance, carries out quite a thorough analysis of why Colombia has been so slow to develop despite its apparently strong credentials, but he can’t seriously think that a less planned and more innovative society would have had much effect against the extreme power and wealth inequalities that he himself acknowledges are at the heart of so many unfulfilled promises of change. And it is striking that he chooses not to mention Cuba, an example if any exists that autocratic politics can indeed lead to better health and education outcomes for poorer people.

In an article I wrote a few years back on how to approach development in the modern world, I called for ‘radical humility in the face of complexity’ (Glennie 2009), so I can only welcome the current trend in development writing, which demonstrates a new-found humility among Northern thinkers and practitioners, perhaps inspired partly by the current economic and political problems facing many Northern countries. Whereas Dambisa Moyo (2009) claimed to ‘know what is necessary’ and was simply frustrated at the inability of bureaucrats and politicians to implement stock policies, Easterly and Ramalingam insist on more circumspection in development advice and practice. This call needs to reach right down to small Western NGOs and right up to the World Bank. Recognising development processes as complex and requiring careful listening and iteration is the first step towards making progress for the communities intended to benefit (as brilliantly set out in a very different way by Anderson, Brown, & Jean, 2012), and it needs to reach all those who still prefer rigid logframes over planning, and who still monitor only a proportion of their copious and complex impacts. Easterly and Ramalingam contribute significantly to this task.

References

Review: Fulfilling Social and Economic Rights
Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Terra Lawson-Remer, and Susan Randolph

The topic of human rights – including the important sub-discipline of economic and social rights – surfaces frequently in a range of contexts and disciplines but is often fraught with controversy. In this ground-breaking book, Fukuda-Parr, Lawson-Remer and Randolph cut through this controversy by developing a clear framework for evaluating the success of nations in fulfilling the economic and social rights of their people. A key plank in this framework is the concept of progressive realisation, which acknowledges that outcome measures in isolation are inadequate in judging state performance. Thus, in designing their Social and Economic Rights Fulfilment (SERF) index – the first composite index of Social and Economic Rights in existence – the authors score each country on how well they are doing in each metric given the resources available to them, as measured by GDP per capita.

This book, and the associated SERF index, helps to fill a big gap in the literature on measuring economic and social rights and will likely become the go-to reference in its field. These quantitative measures of human rights will help scholars and practitioners to better understand the drivers or impacts of social and economic rights, or to simply track progress and identify strong and weak performing countries. This work will also be beneficial to governments who wish to improve the impact of their social spending.