
Book Reviews

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

William Easterly

*Basic Books, New York, 2013, 349 pp., \$29.99/\$34.50 CAN, ISBN 13: 978-0-465-03125-2/
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Development agencies often ignore the rights of the poor by supporting the development plans of authoritarian governments. This is the main argument of *The Tyranny of Experts*, and few observers of development cooperation will disagree.

The book deserves merit for raising three important debates on development: (i) the Blank Slate versus learning from history, (ii) the well-being of nations versus that of individuals and (iii) conscious design versus spontaneous solutions. Furthermore, the most innovative aspect of Easterly's analysis is that he traces back in history the forgotten rights of the poor. As such, he discusses the American preference for technocratic development in China in the 1920s through the 1940s, the British attempt to represent the empire as a benevolent autocrat in colonies in Africa during and after World War II, and the World Bank's tacit approval of authoritarianism in Colombia in the 1940s.

Easterly convincingly attacks the emphasis the development community places on national growth, with little regard for the rights of individuals. He brilliantly criticizes the obsession with goals in development, and reminds us of the measurement errors in many of the data that development experts use. Easterly shows that authoritarian regimes do not perform better on development than democratic regimes. Even if there has been high growth under authoritarian leadership in a few countries, he warns us of attribution biases, which often result in attributing development success to the authoritarian leader.

The book is clearly not directed toward academics only, but aims to reach a broader public. This should be encouraged. As a consequence, the book should not be reviewed exclusively on its academic merit. The many examples in the book help to understand the broader relevance of the debates that Easterly wishes to highlight. One example – the evolution of the Greene Street block in SoHo, New York from 1830 to 2010, where buildings were occupied by different groups and businesses based on bottom-up initiatives – helps to show the importance of spontaneous solutions versus conscious design, which is applicable in the development context as well.

That said, one should critically examine the choice of examples. The overall question of the book, as formulated on Page 7, is 'whether morality, theory, and evidence does or does not show a Tyranny of Experts'. While the examples Easterly gives are certainly interesting, to answer this question convincingly it would have been preferable to focus on more recent cases.

Who exactly are the experts that propagate authoritarian development? Easterly refers to the 'development community', including those who work for bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, think tanks, philanthropies and consultants or advisers to any of the above. Does this group really support authoritarian development? The main contemporary example in the book is Ethiopia,

where experts such as the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Gates Foundation have turned a blind eye to human rights violations. Ethiopia is certainly a relevant example to show the Tyranny of Experts. Yet Ethiopia is also an extreme example, where factors such as the government's strong focus on self-determination and the international community's concern about stability in the country and region are crucial to understanding donor behavior. Moreover, even in Ethiopia there are various degrees to which donors have ignored or defended human rights. While the World Bank has remained rather apolitical, USAID and DFID have at least cautiously addressed human rights, while others including Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark have more explicitly focused on these issues. In the case of Denmark, the human rights situation was an important factor in not including Ethiopia as a partner country in 2005.

This example reflects a more general weakness of the book, namely, that it hardly discusses recent evolutions in international development cooperation. This could have strengthened Easterly's argument, while doing justice to the fact that donors have at least formally included human rights in their development agenda. The introduction of political conditionality by most donors in the 1990s is a crucial shift away from the technocratic approach, but the uneven application of conditionality shows that Easterly's argument still stands. The increase in democracy assistance further reflects this trend, but in practice democracy assistance is often only slightly confrontational *vis-a-vis* the government. Even the World Bank, with its explicit provisions against interference in internal affairs, now gathers data on 'Voice and Accountability' and 'Political Stability', and promotes social accountability programs that aim to give citizens the opportunity to influence local governments on development programs. The Poverty Reduction Paper Strategy process, by which donors support nationally owned development plans, is a recent example of the focus on 'conscious design rather than spontaneous solutions'. While donors theoretically support 'democratic ownership' in development assistance, in practice the ownership agenda has been strongly focused on the government. These examples have been critically examined in the academic literature. They show that, while development experts are generally aware of the importance of the rights of the poor, they either do not know how to address those rights or choose not to do so for various reasons.

This brings me to my next point. Although it is not an explicit aim of his book, Easterly touches upon the question of *why* there is a Tyranny of Experts. Referring to the examples of the United States and China in the pre-Cold War period, British colonialism in Africa, Colombia in the period of the Cold War and Ethiopia during the War on Terror, Easterly argues that donors support authoritarian development when it serves their interests. While this is a valid criticism, the reality is certainly more complex. In his 2002 article *The Cartel of Good Intentions* Easterly described the perverse effects of the bureaucratization of foreign aid. Experts on development aid, including Wil Hout and Thomas Carothers, have argued that the incentive structure of aid bureaucracies often impedes a focus on human rights.

Although Easterly claims that the debate on the State versus the Market is the wrong debate, it is difficult for the reader not to note his rather uncritical belief in the latter, and a perhaps exaggerated mistrust of the former. While Easterly does not argue this explicitly, he does not seem to see any role for the state. Could the state not stimulate spontaneous solutions, for example by promoting innovation, or putting in place the necessary infrastructure, bureaucratic apparatus and regulations? And shouldn't the state combat the inequalities that often go hand in hand with free market development?

Easterly is right to argue that development agencies should take the rights of the poor more seriously and should be skeptical of the power of the state. This continues to be one of the most

problematic aspects of development assistance. Hopefully, this book has, once again, raised awareness among the experts in aid agency headquarters on the forgotten rights of the poor.

Reference

Easterly, W. (2002) The Cartel of Good Intentions. *The Journal of Policy Reform* 5(4): 223–250.

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The Final Deathblow to Development Planning? A Comparative Book Review

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

Basic Books: New York, 2013, 394pp., \$29.99, ISBN: 978-0-465-03125-2

Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World*

Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013, 440pp., £25.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-957802-3

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When William Easterly released his best-seller ‘The White Man’s Burden’, it was seen as the only book in a chain of recent works that dared to go against ‘the inevitable social-democratic consensus ... that aid is a worthwhile undertaking but could be better’ (Maxwell, 2007). The aid community still had its head in the clouds after the 2005 Paris Declaration had given it a new sense of direction and purpose. Cautious optimism about aid and other forms of external support for development was reflected in a series of critical but uplifting publications by, among others, Sachs (2005) and Riddell (2007) on how to achieve greater aid effectiveness.

More recent work on the future of aid and development strikes a rather different, much darker tone, fuelled by donors’ abysmal implementation record of Paris Declaration principles and their increased discomfort with emerging market trade and investment flows in a post-crisis world. Perhaps most notably and radically, Moyo (2009) has declared aid to be ‘dead’, a post-colonial relic effective only in propping up corrupt dictators. The latest books by William Easterly and Ben Ramalingam are adding to the increasingly gloomy-looking aid and development literature.

Easterly’s book is in fact not about aid as such. On several occasions, he has even claimed the book’s subject is not what ‘we’, Westerners, can do for development, although we believe it is so implicitly (see further). Instead, Easterly’s narrative is built around what he calls the consensus view in development practice, that is, that poverty is a problem amenable to technical fixes. Self-acclaimed development experts, including not only aid agency staff, but also Western politicians, NGOs and philanthropists, bestow power and legitimacy upon ‘benevolent autocrats’ (read: dictators and domestic elites) that, with the experts’ assistance, will implement the technical solutions deemed necessary. By avoiding opposition, strongmen can deliver those solutions more