

Robert Chambers

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Professor Robert Chambers is a Research Associate at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex (Brighton, UK), where he has been based for the last 40 years, including as Professorial Research Fellow. He became involved in the field of development management in the 1970s, writing, editing and co-editing several books on land settlement schemes in Africa and on rural development management more broadly. This drew on a dozen years of experience as an administrator, trainer and researcher in Africa (mostly Kenya). Later he worked in India as a researcher and networker during three periods in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Over the years his focus and work moved on to irrigation management, and then to approaches and methods in research and for participatory development and practice, both writing about these and acting as a leading figure in the associated global knowledge networks and communities of practice. Chambers has worked in and with training institutes (Kenya Institute of Administration, East African Staff College, Administrative Staff College of India), research organizations (IIED), universities (IDS Sussex and IDS Nairobi), civil society (ActionAid and the Ford Foundation) and governmental and intergovernmental organizations (Government of Kenya and UNHCR). He has himself or with others written or edited sixteen books and numerous articles on development management, participatory approaches and methods, and critical reflections on development practice and development studies. The book that made him famous is entitled *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (published in 1983). In his latest book, *Provocations for Development* (2012) he again aims to disturb some conventional development ideas and practices, and to put forward his own ideas to be tested and improved. Overall, his career is marked by a spirit of innovation and collaboration, listening and self-criticism. He has received three honorary doctorates in the United Kingdom, and will be receiving a *Doctor Honoris Causa* from Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) at its centennial celebration in 2013.

What was it that moved you from being a mainstream development administrator to becoming the author of ‘Putting the Last First’?

I went out to Kenya in early 1958 as a District Officer, worked for two and a half years in Samburu district and then for a year in Nyeri district, and then spent five or so years training Kenyans at the Kenyan Institute of Administration (KIA) and East Africans at the East African Staff College. Actually, at that time I already was into participatory approaches in the sense of ‘helping one another to learn’, because I did not really know enough to lecture. Ignorance has been a great asset for me, because not knowing enough to be able to lecture means that you have

to find some more active things for people to do. So you resort to participation! Moving in that direction actually was a long process in which there were maybe three key factors.

One was making mistakes, and becoming aware that I had made horrendous mistakes. For example, I had learned that I was a hopeless manager. First in Kenya as a District Officer in 1958-62 and later as manager of the evaluation of the Kenya Special Rural Development Programme in 1969-71. I really messed up: I was politically insensitive and I did not make compromises. I was still disabled by my period as a colonial administrator, when I had had too much power. In fact, making messes of things [and later learning from this] has been very significant for me throughout...

The second factor was when people pointed out to me that I had a biased mind-set. In particular Jon Moris, when I was working with him on research on the Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya, in the mid and late 1960s. We then co-edited a book, and he said to me: 'Robert, I do not know if you realise this, but whenever there is an issue you always take the side of the management'. I came to realise that deep inside myself I identified with the management. I had been a manager myself, a very unsuccessful one, when I worked in the Samburu district. That was very formative in the sense that I spent two-and-a-half years working flat-out with a certain missionary zeal on grazing projects for the Samburu. We thought they were destroying their environment, which to some extent they were. We thought we had to do something very rapidly, as the erosion was spectacular; it was a tragedy of the commons-type of situation through over-grazing. That attempt was disastrous: as soon as I left, the grazing schemes I had been involved in collapsed. The Samburu went back to square one, having gained quite a lot of water, which made it easier for them to destroy more of their environment. It took time to internalise this and to really come to terms with it. I had spent two-and-a-half years of my life working really hard, on something which was doing harm. So that was a gradual learning on my part.

It took a long time: when I came to work in the 1970s on irrigation in South Asia, I was still thinking like a manager – now of an irrigation project, and the solutions that I saw were not participatory. They were not bottom-up, they were solutions to the sorts of routines that the staff should be following and through the methods which they were using. Mick Moore pointed this out to me. I was out of touch and out of date, and I was still out of touch in the 1980s when I wrote a book about canal irrigation management in South Asia. By the time I had written it, and it had the usual academic delays of a few years from the time of the experience, the frontiers had moved on.

The third factor was Jenny, my wife. She is a psychologist and she has put me right about many things. She had a lot to do with the idea of 'putting the last first' and perhaps the phrase, though of course it comes out of the New Testament ('the last shall be first, and the first shall be last'). Jenny has been very important in the evolution of my ideas and what I have written. So those are three influences which have been really important for me.

When you taught at the Kenyan Institute of Administration in the early 1960s, was your approach different from what your colleagues were teaching?

It depended on the subject. There were people teaching Accountancy in a ‘teaching manner’. But most of us were new to teaching and training and enjoyed having a certain amount of exchange of ideas. The idea of ‘case studies’ was in vogue, the ‘Harvard’ case study had come in, and we found it useful and fun to get cases and then invent decision sequences and processes in which the so-called ‘students’ participated. So we would set all sorts of traps for them. You have to know that in the late-colonial phase there was a very interesting openness and lack of defensiveness. You wouldn’t think that now, when the colonial early Mau Mau atrocities are coming out into the courts. Those happened, and were papered over. But in terms of access to government files, it was fantastic! I could go along to a central ministry, as a young man, and say: ‘Look we are doing this training, can you help us with some cases’. Of course the expatriates knew they were leaving, and many of them felt they had been demonised a bit, but they also felt it was right that they should go. We all did, because that was our role: decolonizing. So they were all very collaborative. I particularly remember one case which was called ‘Kariuki’s complaint’, which was from a government file (I only changed the names). There was this guy Kariuki who had been treated outrageously and he made this complaint, which was turned down, and then he made it again. So we went through this whole sequence of complaints and how they were dealt with. I would ask the students at each stage what to do. They were all Makerere graduates, good radicals, and they said ‘he should be compensated’. Then I gave them an overnight task, to write the next memo on the file and said to them: ‘Okay, if you think he should be compensated, write up why and how he should be compensated’, which I knew could take them an hour of writing whereas continuing to say no would take only two or three minutes. Most of them fell for the trap and reversed their advice! Then there was of course this revelation: this is how administrators behave! They minimise work and trouble. There was lots of laughter about this. And some of them went on to be permanent secretaries in two years.

We also did a thing called a ‘District Development Project’ which took about three weeks out of the six-month course. We would fly in huge RAF Beverley transport aircraft (they had to do a certain number of flying hours, so they were willing to take our group on a flight). We flew over the whole of Kenya and then over the district in question. Then we visited the district and talked to and interacted with the people and tried to draw up a district development plan for them. This was far from participatory in the sense of that word now, but a great experience.

How did you move from being a Kenya District Officer to being a trainer and educator? Was that something you chose yourself or was it assigned to you?

We all knew colonial rule was coming to an end. I went into HM Overseas Civil Service realising I would have to change career in my early thirties. The question was in what direction I would go. There were two really exciting things to be involved in within Kenya just before

independence: one was resettlement, and the other was training. I was asked to go as a guide for one of the early courses for African administrators when they walked up on Mount Kenya, and that led to being recruited to the Kenya Institute of Administration (KIA). That was followed by helping to establish the East African Staff College (which now I believe is called the Eastern and Southern Africa Management Institute), with Guy Hunter as the Director. This was a man and a dog effort, with me happily as the dog. Between us we started courses for senior administrators and private sector leaders for East Africa. These rotated between Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Makerere, with people from the three countries together. Guy Hunter was a prolific, articulate and very humane character. I am not sure what his background was: I think probably like me, he had been a bit of a nomad. His most famous book was the 'The new societies of tropical Africa' (1962¹), which now would be terribly dated, but it nevertheless was a historic statement by a progressive outsider. We also used case-studies there quite a lot.

In parallel with that I was doing research on settlement schemes for a PhD. (Earlier after leaving university I had been running away, really, first on an expedition to Gough Island in the South Atlantic and after that to the United States for a year working on a PhD on 'Changes of the American ideal of success, 1919-1956'. My approach was to study the ten non-fiction best-sellers of each year, and how the values they expressed changed, but I never completed it, and instead went on running away - to Kenya.) So in the mid 60s I was trying to, nowadays you would say, 're-brand' myself to look like a respectable academic. Because there was still a certain stigma associated with having been a colonial administrator, which I think misunderstood a lot of the colonial administration, though it was perfectly understandable as many terrible things were done, as we know. I was also passionate about politics. I was a Liberal, but they only had nine members of parliament, so there was no prospect of a career as a parliamentarian. So I moved in the academic direction, but I was never really comfortable with it. I certainly could have gone into other directions as well, but the KIA experience pointed me in the direction of teaching.

Another key influence for me was my last year as an undergraduate at Cambridge. I had gone there to do Natural Sciences, but after I had done my National Service I switched to History. In the last year I studied the *risorgimento*, the unification of Italy. Very few students were interested in this, because you had to learn enough Italian to be able to read materials and also be able to read French, because that was the official language in the (later Italian) Piemonte at that time. This subject taught me the extreme difficulty of getting to the truth. A fiction about the *risorgimento* was that all the main actors (Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cavour, etc.) were working together, but they weren't! They were antagonistic. Cavour, the Prime Minister of the Piemonte, wrote all his own (diplomatic) letters, and he would write letters on the same evening that were completely contradictory, in terms of his stated motivations and interest. So you never knew

¹ <http://www.questia.com/library/1286023/the-new-societies-of-tropical-africa-a-selective>

what Cavour really was trying to do. Later, under Mussolini, they forged some of the letters which were part of the [supposed] evidence. So the question was: which of these letters have been forged? It was fantastic getting into the details and trying to get to the truth. That burning passion has never left me, and it is something that drives me still now because of the extraordinary distortion and falsification of figures and information which go around in development.

So the lesson was not to take anything for granted?

Yes. For example, I am currently mostly working on Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), and this led me into sanitation figures, particularly in India, where there is 60% of the open defecation in the world and a third of the undernourished children. The number of the toilets being built in India has been spectacularly exaggerated: as the figures were built up cumulatively, the estimate came to be 68% of the rural households having toilets. But when the census was carried out in 2011 it was 31%. So there were headlines about 60 million missing toilets! It raises questions about ‘How do you confront distortions of this sort?’ and ‘How do you confront the fantasies of power?’

The fantasies of power-holders have become a preoccupation, and the way in which they are fed and sustained by false exaggerated statistics when targets are set. Being told what you are known to want to believe, and what you are known to want to hear. This is the subject of the book which I am working on at the moment, perhaps to be called, if I dare, ‘Knowing in Development’.

This is not just about distortions. It is also about gaps. Let me tell you a bit more about this, because that is how I have survived as an ‘academic’: going for subjects which have been relatively neglected, and then getting out of them when too many people get involved. When I was interviewed once for a promotion, which I failed, I was interrogated about why I had not stuck to my [second] PhD subject, which was settlement schemes in tropical Africa. Almost by implication this was ‘unprofessional’ of me: I had started on the subject, and I should have stayed there. But if you stick to a subject, or say ‘I am a Sociologist’, you have to know a lot about Sociology. I knew very little about Sociology. If you say ‘I am an Economist’ you have to know quite a lot about Economics, but I know very little about Economics. Or the same with Anthropology. You have to have had that professional training. But it may also be disabling because it gives you pre-set frames, concepts and words into which you fit reality, and defined boundaries, and these affect what you see and what you do not see. Instead, thanks to the tolerance and trust of IDS, my wife and my children, and funders, who all allowed me the freedom, my pleasure has been to be nomadic, regularly changing places and subjects.

The first subject was ‘Why hasn’t there been a Green Revolution for rice?’, working with John and Barbara Harriss and Indian and Sri Lankan colleagues in the 1970s in South India and Sri Lanka. I was recruited as somebody who would work on ‘agricultural extension’, but when I

started this research it was clear I was not going to get anywhere. The extension officers were lying, they were falsifying their diaries... I was interested in how they spent their time, but there was no way I was going to get anything useful by trying to study that. What emerged from local people's own priorities, and which was really interesting because of the diversity we found, was *water*, and water management, and irrigation. That was an amazingly pristine area at that time. So thanks to Benny Farmer (the Director of the Centre for South Asian Studies at Cambridge) I was able to switch to water management and irrigation. That was fascinating. Because so little was known you could find out new things very simply and easily. I worked on that for about fifteen years, and then I got out because it became far too professional. Then I shifted into participation, to some extent, and methodologies. It was in the 1980s when Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) began to come up, and that in time led on to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). It was an incredible privilege to be able to shift like that, through not being 'pigeon-holed' as a Political Scientist or an Economist, or an Anthropologist, or an anything else! I make this semi-joke, but it is also serious, that I am an 'undisciplined social scientist'.

So you became a sort of specialist, but now in development methodology or investigative methodology which is not specific to any sector or area, or not growing out of any specific academic disciplinary tradition, but instead a sort of field-based exploration, giving you a perspective which you gradually theorised as a broader 'undisciplined discipline'?

I sometimes call it 'opportunistic nomadism', because it was a bit like being a pastoralist: if you realise there is some good green grass over there, you make for it! Which is what pastoralists do. They do not know what opportunity is going to come up, and I have never known really what is going to come up. While there is some grass that lasted, as it did with irrigation, I have stayed there and had a good time. But irrigation management was becoming very technical when I left that subject. There were other subjects: trees, for a time, for example. And I think that not having that disciplinary orientation gave a freedom to see things differently.

But 'Rural Development: Putting the Last First' is not just about a series of particularly interesting green pastures, it is also a bigger theory about knowledge and power, as reflected in the title. So it is about social relations, and then how that should be reflected in research into development practice. Is it correct that this book is where your perspective jelled, including the looking for gaps, querying sources of information, being open to multiple sources of information, but also more than that?

With hindsight that is correct. 'Putting the Last First' has sold more than any of the other books, and it has been cited more than any of the other books. It was all part of an on-going process. I don't think the process suddenly had some sort of a consummation or anything like that. I find the act of writing very significant. A lot of things come up when you start writing about a subject, particularly if it has got some perspective which is relatively unexplored. Writing raises all sorts of questions and ideas, and you then start looking for information which is going to

support or contradict it. A lot of that happened with 'Putting the Last First'. If you look at all the examples which are there, there was a sort of iteration between evidence and ideas and then looking for further evidence. And when I wrote it, I was angry.

You said that being rejected by IDS as a professor was, however, in retrospect the best thing that ever happened to you, as it very much influenced what you would do afterwards. Why was that?

I am in danger of rewriting history in terms of sequences here, but it was in that interview that a member of the board of the university really put me through it. He interviewed me about my book *Settlement Schemes in Tropical Africa*, the first book I published (Chambers, 1969). This interview completely floored me, because I had not been back to that topic for ten years! It was all part of the past and a subject I had left. It made me realise that I had not specialised and would not specialise in a normal disciplinary way. It made me much more aware of this. It was so liberating to be turned down for a Chair! I said to myself: 'All right, I am not going to posture as an academic, I am just going to do my thing'. IDS was so wonderful because the strategy could be that if you wrote a book every five years or so, none of your colleagues would read it, but they would feel they had to give you the benefit of the doubt and reappoint you. You see, *Putting the Last First* had not yet been published. If it had been published, they might have given me the promotion. The anger that was generated by that humiliation fed into *Putting the Last First*. There is a sentence right at the beginning saying 'the extremes of rural poverty in the third world are an outrage' (p.2). I felt that I could use that sort of language because I was not going to pretend to be one of those dispassionate academics. So that was liberating and I am very glad it happened. My whole trajectory would have been different after 1982, if that hadn't happened. So I thank the members of that appointments board.

You became a development radical, but at the start that was in particular as a development manager. You were trying to look through the agenda of development management activities, from initial appraisal through to post-action review, and rethink them. Looking back on that, do you feel you had much success in making development management a bit more humane and flexible?

No. To some extent I think the way I, and others, pursued it in the 1970s (in Kenya) was a blind alley. We were trying to be rational in introducing procedures which were demanding a lot of information, without our being fully aware of the demands made on the people that had to supply that information, or of the distortion of the information itself, to the extent that it was ever supplied at all. This was revealed particularly with the evaluation procedures at the district and sub district level in Kenya, from people who were involved in the Special Rural Development Project. It was terrible in hindsight: we devised procedures in Nairobi which we then expected them to carry out like robots. I was misguided. I thought you could change the behaviour of agricultural extension staff by changing their procedures. To some extent this is true, but it

depends on how you do it and whose ideas are there and what demands they make, and so on. This experience fed my interest in methodology, which has been a theme all the way through. I am very interested in the ways you can do things, and the transformative potential of new ways.

Take for example immersion visits. They are a procedure, which gained its own methods. It can be very transformative, at a personal level, as you stay for several days and nights with a [poor] family and see things from their point of view. You hear their stories, work with them, eat with them, all that....

You mention that your mid 1970s fieldwork in India affected you a lot. Did that include these so-called 'immersion' visits?

No, it didn't though there was just a little bit of that earlier when I was a District Officer in Samburu. Karl Osner has been the great pioneer of immersions, with the EDP Exposure and Dialogue Programme, from back in the 1980s. EDP have done a great number of immersions together with SEWA and others. In the 90s Wolfensohn at the World Bank was keen that his senior staff should do them, and in fact many of them did. Many of them also found the immersion very good. That sort of experience really stays with you. Currently we recommend that senior persons on the post-MDG panel should do immersions. Ravi Kanbur did one before leading the World Development Report of 2000, and that was very influential for him. You can find a short account of his immersion on the front page of the Report.

Similarly, I don't remember much about the times at IDS, but I do remember the times when I was away. The first spell was preparing the evaluation of the rural development programme in Kenya [1969-71]. The next one was field research in South India and Sri Lanka on the Green Revolution [1973-74]. It exposed all of us to a lot of the bad sides of rural life in India: discrimination, extremes of poverty, and the multiple disadvantages that people had. It gave good insights into that. The next one was UNHCR [1975-76]. In total I had three spells in India: the Green Revolution project, then with the Ford Foundation [1981-84] and then in 1989-91 when PRA was starting, in Hyderabad. I think the Hyderabad phase was all rather damaging for my family, and I deeply regret that... But for me it provided incredible freedom! I was supported in India by DfID, the Aga Khan Rural Support programme, and the Ford Foundation, with freedom to do pretty much anything. When I arrived in 1989 it was clear PRA was about to take off, and there were people really interested in this who wanted to innovate. So I simply switched to that, and nobody blinked an eyelid. All my sponsors said "that's fine". The people innovating with PRA in NGOs did not have much freedom to network and share their experiences, whereas I could help them to network. Also one had the freedom to spend time staying and listening in villages, a sort of immersion visit that we used to do in the early days of PRA.

Now you don't get such freedom and flexibility anymore. Now, you usually get a log frame, and you are log-framed into a prison. I never have had that prison, as I refused to do log frames. We

have shifted backwards in international aid, using ‘results-based approaches’. It is very sad, because it reflects lack of trust and brings a lack of flexibility, a lack of ability to respond to rapidly changing situations.

It seems you have had a love-hate relationship with IDS, since you indicate that your best periods were when you were outside IDS.

Those were the times I particularly remember. Times at IDS are a bit of a blur, except for conferences which we convened and organised, such as those on Seasonality, Rapid Rural Appraisal, and Farmer First. IDS was a good place to convene from. The ability to convene is very precious. The strategy was to work on a subject and to develop contacts progressively over a period and then bring people together. That’s what we did with RRA [Rapid Rural Appraisal] and later Farmer First: the contacts were made over a period of five years or so before we brought them all together. (Unfortunately, the RRA conference never led to a book. There was the Khon Kaen conference book (Khon Kaen 1987) a few years later, which was really important. The papers of the RRA meeting at IDS were similar, but different in including more case studies. But the papers were never published because we lacked USD 10,000 for the editor who was lined up, and that the Ford Foundation did not want to give.) So convening power has been really useful over the years, simply through being based there at IDS.

And the love-hate... it is more the love of the things that happened when I was away from IDS, rather than any hate. It is not really a love-hate thing. In fact, I am very grateful to IDS for having given me the space and the support, and for colleagues who have benignly given me the benefit of the doubt and continually reappointed me. All IDS Directors were very supportive, from Dudley Seers who recruited me, through to the recent directors who have been very good in allowing me to stay on and provide me with facilities. The participation team, of which I am a still a member, now numbers well over 20 people, and sort of grew out of the PRA stuff I did in the 1990s. John Gaventa then came in and did a great job as a [real] manager: he was able to expand the team and start new activities, while I could continue to be involved.

Going back to methods in general: can we call you a methodology-focused activist?

That is putting too much emphasis on methodology I think. Methodology is one strand, something which is always there [in my work] and always relevant and important. It is also an area where it is possible, I think, to have a big public influence. From that point of view I think it important that it receives a lot of attention, though it depends how it is done.

In some of your work you in a way become a theorist of methodological innovation and evolution?

There is this evolution going on with methodologies. PRA has been particularly fertile I think: the methods can be used in many different contexts. We are in a new phase now with

methodologies. We used to have ‘named methodologies’ -often identified with one person’s name- such as ‘Appreciative Inquiry’, or the ‘Reflect’ approach to literacy and social change. What tends to happen more now is that people evolve methodologies for themselves. It is a sort of ‘collaged hybridization’. People invent and improvise, and they become aware of different possibilities. It is like cooking: you can always cook the same thing, or you can get new ingredients and you can mix them in, or you can explore different ways of cooking. We certainly need more good chefs: we need more facilitators of innovation.

But the question is whether there are enough people who can do that. A few people are extremely creative, such as Dee Jupp (2007). Other people get stuck in a rut with a particular method. Personal identification with a method or approach is also a hazard. The ‘ego thing’ goes with that. Ego is a big problem in some contexts. David Archer, who was so much responsible for Reflect, has written very well on this (Archer 2007). In the early days he identified with Reflect so that if someone criticised it he felt it personally. In my own case, I did not invent PRA, as I was simply around when it was happening and did some workshops, networking and writing about it. But even with PRA there was a stage (this was the early 1990s) when if people were very critical of PRA practice – the poor quality of training, mechanistic application of methods, routinisation in going to scale, and so on – I felt it personally even though I agreed with many of the criticisms and made them myself. And that was dangerous, because ego and defensiveness can be a big enemy of methodological development.

Nowadays my focus is on participatory methodologies: especially in community-led total sanitation (CLTS). Particularly in India we are facing big dilemmas over whether to hold rigidly to the principles of CLTS like no subsidies for hardware for toilets. Because as soon as you accept hardware subsidies for toilets you lose self-help. You lose collective behaviour change. To what extent can one then say: ‘Too bad if the Indian policy is to do hardware subsidies, nothing is going to change that. So let us see whether there are bits and pieces of CLTS-type methods which can be used in the government programme.’ There is quite a lot of debate around that issue now. It is very difficult in India, but much easier in Africa. Only Burkina Faso and South Africa have got heavy subsidy policies. Almost all other countries are using CLTS without subsidy, and have even faced down big donors such as the World Bank, the European Union, and the African Development Bank on this. When they wanted to introduce programmes with hardware subsidies these countries said ‘No, this is contradictory to our policy’. Mali, Mauritania, Ghana, Nigeria have all declined subsidies from these organizations. So in that sense: yes, methodologies can be very significant and important when you have a methodology which works. But then you can have this dilemma like the Indian dilemma around CLTS, where it becomes very difficult to see what it is right to do. That is something that I and others are wrestling with at the moment. People feel passionately about this, which is very understandable.

Why did you enter into this sanitation issue and why do you think it is so important?

Kamal Kar was a great PRA facilitator. Around 2000 he was involved in the evaluation of a sanitation programme in rural Bangladesh for WaterAid. He developed this [CLTS] method, which is facilitating people to do their own analysis of their own shitting. By the way, the word 'shitting' is always used: we have got a glossary of over 200 words for shit! Kamal developed some irreducible principles, such as: no standardized design, no hardware subsidy. People build their own toilets, and can then, it is hoped, gradually move themselves up the so-called 'sanitation ladder'. Kamal had some success in spreading the method in South Asia, but in India it was very difficult given the prevailing subsidy policy. But when he went to Africa in 2007 and did a training there, it began to take off. One estimate, which I believe tends to be on the high side, is that now 10 million people in rural Africa are living in communities which are free of open defecation as a result of CLTS. I don't think it is as high as that, because of the nature of the reporting and problems of verification. But nevertheless, there is no doubt that it has affected millions of people in Africa and that it is spreading exponentially.

Why do I think this is important? Well one reason is because of the neglected gap between 'shit' and 'nutrition'. We talk about FTIs: Faecally-Transmitted Infections. This term is important because it includes much more than faecal-oral transmission, that many people talk about. There is a gross underestimate of the impact of FTIs on nutrition. I think that one major reason is that diarrhoeas have received the bulk of the attention. The diarrhoeas are dramatic, they are horrible, they do kill. But the big factor is that they are (relatively easily) measurable: it is possible to generate numbers. Medical scientists like that, and they can then make comparisons and calculations. Similarly, economists are able to take the number of reported diarrhea cases and use that as the basis for their calculations of the costs of lack of sanitation and hygiene. However, the diarrheas are only the tip of the iceberg as there are many more infections including worms that steal food or suck blood. Then there is *environmental enteropathy*. This is bacterial infections in the gut that erode the wall of the gut and reduce the surface area so there is less absorption of nutrients. And a lot of nutritional energy is used in generating antibodies to fight the infections as they get into the system. All this is very difficult to measure, and is almost certainly extremely widespread. It is probably a major factor in the undernutrition of a high proportion of undernourished children in the developing world. However, it is not properly recognised yet by nutritionists and mainstream medical scientists.

My estimate is that if you could eliminate all the FTIs as much as half of the undernutrition of children would disappear. That is dramatic! Everyone loves the mouth and putting food into children's mouths. That has to be good, but I am saying the problem is just as much the anus. India is in danger of being left behind by the other countries in dealing with child undernutrition. India has 60% of the open defecation of the world, and that percentage is increasing, a third of the world's undernourished children, and a failed and still failing programme for rural sanitation. It is an awful tragedy!

One point you seem to suggest is that social studies and health studies, for example, do not regularly work together: they have no coffee machines where the researchers meet up and chat informally. Whereas in development studies there is a more natural interdisciplinarity between social sciences, but it is limited as it hardly includes health studies.

But you don't have to have them necessarily in the same institute, if you instead have the freedom to interact with people in other institutes, and the support to do that. I mean, in the early 1990s I did not have any allies in IDS for PRA work. My colleagues were in IIED and elsewhere (for example, in Action Aid, and in Wageningen), and we had workshops every two months or so on PRA and where it was going. They came down to IDS and we used to have these workshops. I think that type of interaction is very important.

Talking about Action Aid: you have been influential in promoting the ALPS [Accountability, Learning and Planning System] approach in this organisation. This was revolutionary in the world of NGO accountability, even though it was never really implemented in the way it was meant to be, as the pressure for 'results-based' approaches pushed it to the background. How do you look back at that?

ALPS was implemented in some places. The question with any new methodology is whether on balance it has had a good effect. Even a methodology that is badly implemented can have on balance good effects. There are trade-offs between something that is not implemented very well, but still on a huge scale, and something that is implemented very well but only on a tiny scale. I would argue that, very often, the large scale is the thing to go for and to try and build-in self-improvement and self-critical reflection. ALPS had influence outside Action Aid in the sense that it got quoted a lot (even over-quoted, I think). PLAN, which is bigger than Action Aid, has adopted something of ALPS, which I think they call PALS [Participatory Action Learning System] as they evolved something similar in their own way. That is actually fine, because ownership is very important. When CLTS was adopted by Unicef they called it CATS [Community Approaches to Total Sanitation]. Some people objected, they found the re-naming terrible. My feeling was: this is good – Unicef, such a key and influential organisation, has adopted CLTS, and made it their own by calling it something different. The question related to ALPS is: can you introduce procedures which will be transformative? And that has got a big question mark after it. Institutionally, methodologies have life cycles. One of the subjects that has not been adequately studied according to my knowledge is the life cycles of participatory methodologies. I am collecting evidence on it, but I doubt that I will survive long enough to write about it.

So there again you see a gap?

Sure, there is kind of a gap. But someone might well have written about it already. The hope is that self-awareness – on the part of innovators who develop methodologies – about stages in

their life-cycles can be helpful. The stages may be: naming the methodology; owning it; disseminating it; involving your own ego in it; it being attacked and feeling threatened; it being done badly; intervening in the areas where it has gone badly; and so on. The cycle goes differently in different cases. Sometimes, as David Archer did, the main innovator withdraws, and the methodology goes on its own and spreads. A different example is David Cooperrider in relation to Appreciative Inquiry', with which he certainly identified himself very strongly and where he has been treated like a guru. Overall, I think it would help people who invent methodologies to think more about these life cycles.

In your writings sometimes you refer to human rights-based approaches. How far have you intensively and consciously linked to them?

Human rights have come up parallel to the things I have been working on. The concept of human rights is very important. The legal nature of human rights in international declarations is very important too, for their implementation. The concept can go wrong also. Declared rights sometimes have promoted dependence. For example, if you emphasise the human right to sanitation, which is now in UN policy statements, does this mean people are right to say 'I have the right to be provided with sanitation by the government'? If people have a human right to sanitation, it is instead a right to be facilitated to provide it for themselves in a sustainable and gradually improving way which is appropriate for them. Expressed like that I am in favour of sanitation as a human right.

One of the methods you have promoted is playful exploration of concepts. Concepts often generate expectations, for example: 'participation', but also 'development', or 'ownership'; but people do not always grasp their full meaning. I think you believe concepts can often confuse people rather than providing them with clarity? You yourself coined the concept 'responsible well-being' as one alternative to 'development': why was this never taken up?

'Responsible well-being' involved putting two words together, and then seeing if people would pick them up, and give them meaning and adopt them, and make them their own words. Attempting that is fun to do. The same thing with slogans. 'Farmer First' is one, although it was not mine (very few have been mine). 'Farmer First' became the title of the book, even though one editor wanted a more descriptive title like 'Farmer participation in agricultural research'. But Clive Lightfoot had this excellent slogan 'farmer first', which clearly worked very well and got adopted.

You also introduced 'good change' as synonym for 'development', didn't you?

I would certainly still hold to the 'good change' formulation, because it raises questions of whose idea is it of what is good, what change is significant, and so on. And that is the whole point: to raise those questions and to suggest that development cannot be reduced to economic growth alone, as growth is only one sort of change. The 'responsible well-being' formulation has not

really been taken up. Well, it has a bit: there are people at the University of Bath who have worked on it and adopted it, and Oxfam Hong Kong took it up as well. But true, it has not truly taken off. I think ‘responsible’ is a rather unsexy word: it is rather Victorian, but I could not think of a better word. But if you can feed a phrase in, so that other people adopt it, that is actually a way in which you can help to change the way in which people see things and work on them. So, one of the things that I find important is to analyse the words that we are using. With the programme WORDLE you can get out the numbers of times a word has been used in any article. When you look at that in relation to a text, you realize what is dominating its thought. I went through the Paris Declaration on development cooperation, for example, to identify the words most used, and I made up a sentence of these fifteen predominating words. And what you get is quite shocking: “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 words *people*, *poor*, *power* and *relationship* are nowhere to be found!

You use humour a lot to clarify things, and to make ideas more accessible and relative. You are often searching for a provoking entry point, so that people can relax and become more creative, right?

I think fun is awfully important. Fun and enjoying yourself. I think there is a basic human right to fun. Look at children: if they cannot have fun, then there is something very wrong with the culture and the society. Children should be able to have fun and they should be encouraged to be creative.

But the big issues of development studies are not supposed to be funny, are they? I see you bringing fun to generate creativity and to push people to go beyond their borders. Despite the need for this, development studies remains utterly serious.

I suppose that is natural and right, on one hand, as it is all very serious. There is outrage, and it is absolutely appalling what is happening in our world, and which we allow to happen. There is all that. But you can marry and match these two sides, seriousness and fun.

So do you bring fun into shit?

Oh yes! The international glossary of synonyms for shit in many languages is a good example. I go around with this list, stick it up on the wall, and ask ‘can you please add to this?’ Just using the word shit is provoking and generative in itself. A great achievement last year was that I managed to get this into the published record of the House of Commons, of the International Development Committee. The word ‘shit’ appears three times. And they loved it: politicians are much more relaxed than senior civil servants. They were very happy talking about shit... and understanding the reasons behind it. Not to pretend that this is a nice thing which you can politely call excrement or faeces, but that it is actually disgusting shit. And this process eventually leads, with

good facilitation and CLTS, into good sanitation. People are asked to make a map and show where they shit, and also where they go in the middle of the night when it is raining; often outside the neighbour's house. So they see and realise there is shit over the whole damn place. Facilitation includes all sorts of rather gruesome things, like picking shit up and putting it down next to food and then watching the flies going back and forth. People get to the point of saying 'we are eating one another's shit and it has got to stop'. That is the ignition moment, which comes usually after two or three hours of the facilitation. These things are fun: there is embarrassment and disgust, but also laughter. Laughter acts as a lightning conductor for the other emotions, but it is also quite genuine.

Have you found any cultural resistances to your methods? Can you be funny about shit anywhere? Or are there places where it does not work?

This is a very interesting question. I can give you my prejudice about this. My prejudice is that it works everywhere when it is well facilitated. When people raise cultural objections it is because we are not facilitating well. What we have tended to find is that people will raise cultural objections such as, for example, that a father in law and a daughter in law cannot do it in the same hole, or that if you put it in a hole all sorts of bad things will happen to you. I believe the right way to respond is to say: 'Well that's your problem, if you want to go on eating each other's shit, it's fine with me', and walk away. It is not as simple as I say it here, but that is an element. I think cultural factors have been considerably exaggerated in the sanitation area. I am not saying culture is unimportant. But if you treat it as an inhibitor, so that you don't facilitate with confidence, then the process won't work and the inhibition will become self-reinforcing.

So essentially it is about respect?

Yes. Respect and self-respect. I should add that the benefits of CLTS are not automatic. It must be done well, and the pit must be properly covered. Just having a toilet is not enough because a high percentage of them are filthy. In Tanzania, where CLTS has not taken off, we see a high percentage of filthy toilets. I have been to children's toilets in schools, so bad that the children don't use them; they shit out in the open. And I would do the same. So it is not simple.

What have been the fiercest criticisms of your work, and how do you look back on those?

There must have been many that I am unaware of. But with the benefit of hindsight (I did not see the following distinction at the time), those that I did know about are of two sorts: those that were personal to me and changed my behaviour, orientation and thinking; and those that were more general.

Some of those that were personal and changed me stand out vividly in my memory. Criticisms of my writing that hurt and made a deep impression: the teacher at school who said in his high-pitched voice 'Chambers, your sentences are too *angular*'; an adverse confidential report from

Charles Chenevix Trench, my District Commissioner in Kenya, which said ‘he is *incurably* verbose on paper’ (my italics; the covering letter, perhaps tongue in cheek, then contradicted itself by saying that I should have little difficulty in correcting this – but there is too much evidence now that the report was right); and Alan Simmance at the Kenya Institute of Administration who went through a brochure I had drafted, crossing out about every fifth word. This was painful for me but a great improvement to the text, and an enduring lesson. Other criticisms held up a mirror and made me see myself. I mentioned earlier two that were transformative: Jon Moris in the 1960s and Mick Moore a decade or more later pointing out that that my mindset was managerial and top-down. They shocked me, and helped me on the long and slow transition to participatory approaches, methods and behaviours.

The more general criticisms have clustered around participation and participatory approaches and methods. Some have been useful in bringing to light bad practices. These have come from many critical and self-critical practitioners, including myself and a few academics with personal field experience. But most academic criticisms have not influenced me much. Some have been based on ignorance: concerning rigour, for instance, only a few academics have ever used or experienced the group-visual synergies of PRA or the democracy of the ground, or even know what these are. Other criticisms in earlier days were derived from academics’ own defective practices, like the discovery by some that women were marginalised in many community meetings – which they then assumed participatory practitioners did not know about or do something about! Then there was the much cited and not always well-informed book edited by Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari ‘*Participation: the New Tyranny?*’ and a few erudite critiques which I was sometimes invited to respond to, and declined. Perhaps this was cowardice on my part. But also I feared being drawn into a bottomless bearpit of erudite contestation which I told myself would take time and energy, and would require familiarisation with another literature, language and concepts. I just did not want to get into this. I saw it as a potentially costly and worrying distraction when there was so much else that was so much more positive and enthralling to engage in. The overwhelming evidence of unfolding experience would, I fondly told myself, speak for itself. And in the event ‘*The New Tyranny?*’ was well answered by others, still critical thank goodness and still with a question mark, but better informed and more constructive, in the book Sam Hickey and Giles Mohan edited a few years later, *Participation: from Tyranny to Transformation?*

Looking back, what do you think have been your lasting contributions, and what would you have done differently? Both in your writings and in your whole career path?

I would like to leave the contributions rather to other people to judge. I find the singling-out of my work in, for example, the recent (2011) book called ‘*Revolutionising Development*’ so generously conceived and edited by Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones, rather embarrassing: for there is a terrible danger of over-attribution. Other people have had a huge part in all these things, and very often the ideas have come from other people. Take for example ‘optimal

ignorance'. This phrase did not come from me: it came from Warren Ilchman, an American political scientist. I have said this and put it in writing but it is still attributed to me. But there are a few phrases like 'optimal unpreparedness' that may be genuinely mine.

In terms of what I would have done differently, there are many things. The mistakes which I made as a district officer in Kenya: if I was to live through that phase of my life again, I would do things amazingly differently. I would try to be participatory, I would be concerned about sustainability, which was not a word or concept that we used at all in those days. If I could go back to the Kenya Institute of Administration days, I would have tried to be aware of the political pressures that African administrators were going to be under. We gave them no preparation for that at all. We were, as colonial administrators (Kenyans as well as Europeans at that stage), not subject to the same type of pressures that our African successors were to face. I would [now] try to find ways in which their independence and integrity could be supported. That was a very big oversight of imagination. If I could go back to the research in South India and Sri Lanka, I would have adopted a very different attitude towards a questionnaire survey. It was so shocking in hindsight: we were sitting in Cambridge and concocted a questionnaire to be administered, while we had no idea about people's own categories for things. It was only towards the end of the project that I realized people had their own categories for the different soil types. I was not aware of that! I just had no concept of that. I spent two days trying to map the wells in an Indian village, and failed. Later, when we started PRA, farmers made their own maps of their wells in a similar Indian village including details about which were working and which were not... in 25 minutes! So all of those things I would do radically differently with what I know now. If you have participatory approaches and people are keen to do it you will have multiple knowledges and it is absolutely amazing what can come out. So all that top-down stuff I would do very differently. My sense of solutions to canal irrigation would now be radically different too, because I would see participation and applying pressures from below on the staff, and taking over from the staff, as a way forward. But those insights came after I left that particular field. So those are a few things I would do very differently. And I would work on my mind set. The idea of being critically self-reflective was simply not around at that time, at least not to my knowledge.

Has this really improved, this aspect of critical self-reflectiveness amongst scholars?

I don't think it is nearly widespread enough. I think every university specialization should have a special session of critical reflection by students on what the education you have had in this discipline has done to your mind. The way you frame reality, the way you see things, and comparing that with people in other disciplines: what is their vocabulary, how do they see things, how do these relate? That sort of cross-disciplinary understanding and reflexivity is largely missing from our education system. We would do so much better in development if we were more self-aware and more critically reflective.

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