



International development: challenges for a world in transition

Approaches to development

Narrator:

Development is obviously about elevating poverty. But it's also about value systems. Who's notions of social progress should prevail? What ideas about human well being are universally acceptable? What space should be found for locally specific hopes, aspirations and ways of seeing? One of the most influential thinkers, who's engaged with these questions, is Robert Chambers. His ideas have been fundamentally important to non governmental organisations. And to government officials. Wanting to pursue grass roots or participatory approaches. But they also have had an increasing impact on the big official aid programmes. And within the world bank. In this programme, we're going to look at Chambers thought provoking and controversial views about different kinds of knowledge and different experiences of reality. For Chambers development requires that people own their development agenda. And do now have it thrust upon them. Here he is introducing his ideas a workshop held in central Asia.

RC:

One of the ways we express this is in terms of handing over the stick. The stick is a symbol of authority. Sometimes it can be used for diagramming. Sometimes to initiate a process. You may start drawing with a stick and then you hand it over to somebody. So that they are in command of the process, and it's theirs. And they're making the decision. And then you can stand back.

The outsider becomes redundant. The activity just takes place with it's own momentum, because people often become very very enthusiastic. Because it's fun and it's interesting, and it's also useful.

Narrator:

Well this sounds great. But will it really change the world. Teddy Brett of the LSC is one of Chambers severest critics.

TB:

I think Chambers views have been very interesting in changing the way people think about development and getting people to take the ideas of local people more seriously. However, I have to say that I have some really major concerns about them. Most of the things that Chambers is talking about, have to do with small scale local development activities.

Now these are no doubt important. But poor people and local areas also depend completely on things like the operation of national road systems, railways, the overall economy. So although local knowledge is very important, it has to be put into a context where we've got to be very careful about trying to rubbish the importance of external knowledge.

Narrator:

Chambers method for finding out about and engaging with local knowledge is usually referred to as 'participatory rural appraisal', or 'PRA'. Reflecting the fact that it evolved from studies of the rural poor. Although nowadays it's also commonly used in urban areas. For Chambers, empowerment cannot be achieved through imposing external knowledge. But must be grounded in local understandings.

RC:

The best people to assess empowerment, are the people who may or may not be empowered. One of the slogans if you like, which is used in PRA is 'Ask them'. The immediate question then is who's them? If we're thinking about our participatory approach to development, that maybe has an agenda to improve the position of marginalised young women. Isn't there a factor here of actually disempowering maybe powerful men within that population.

Male:

You're absolutely right, that it's a very problematical area. If there's a process of interaction between an outside agency or outside people, and a community. It often has to start with the local power structure. But over time, it's possible to work in ways which gradually involve more and more of the people who are disempowered. Or even to meet them. And very often to meet them, and have separate meetings with them. It's a question of time and process. It's not something that can be done rapidly, very often. That's one dimension. The other dimension is thinking about power itself. We have a tendency partly because of the syntax that we use with power, to regard it as a commodity. So you gain power, or you lose power, or you surrender power. It makes it sound as though it's good to have more, and worse to have less. In the reality of human interactions and satisfactions and fulfilment. This is very misleading. Disempowering yourself in a formal sense, can be very very rewarding. This actually is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for the 21st century. To find better ways to enable those who are powerful to gain satisfaction from exercising less power. So when you raise this question in the context of the community. I would say 'Yes' there may be powerful interests that are threatened. The question is whether they have as it were a better nature. Another side of them. Which is the side which is to do with generosity, to do with being respected within the community. For being an open and generous person. Who can gain from what informal terms might seem to be disempowerment. Because others are being empowered.

(CLEAR FOCUS PRODUCTIONS)