



International development: challenges for a world in transition

Meeting Basic Needs

Narrator:

So the crux of Chambers argument seems to be that the knowledge of academically or scientifically trained experts may be valuable. But it cannot be deployed effectively to promote social progress without being linked to processes which empower the poor. For Peter Louisos, there's a real danger here of lapsing into a counter productive and over blown rhetoric, which obscures realities rather than clarifies them.

PL:

Well empowerment is a word that doesn't come very easily to my lips, I have to say. Because I think empowerment ought to be about the resource base that people have to live on. And I think the basic determinants of people's lives are fundamentally economic. So if you can't improve either their access to land, or water. You can't put any more money in their pockets. I believe that it's somewhat mystifying to talk about empowering them through simply offering them participatory ideas to think about.

RC:

Look if you lived two days off the road in Nepal, even if you've got an indigenous health system. That in principle would meet some of your pressing health needs. If you need a caesarean operation for your mother and child to survive, there isn't anything in the indigenous health repertoire that can meet that need. And the simple fact is that a lot of women will die in childbirth in Nepal because they're too far away from modern medicine. It doesn't have to be western medicine. It can be Nepalean modernised medicine now. But if you're too far away from it, no amount of consultation of participatory theory will bring the road closer.

Narrator:

Do you feel that this whole sort of Chambers bandwagon has been a bit of a red herring? It's creating a discourse if you like about all these sorts of things, that have taken the eye off the ball?

Male:

No. I think they have done some real good. But I think people get carried away by the rhetoric of participatory development. And fail to see that it doesn't remove conflicts of interest, structures of power. It doesn't bridge any kind of material needs gap. So it's an idealist theory that really tries to tell people we can help the rural poor pull themselves up by their bootstraps by changing the pictures in their head about the way society works. And I think that is only true in a very very limited number of marginal situations. Where if they learn to knock forcefully on the door, that door may be opened. Because politically the time is right for that door to be opened. But in a lot of cases, it's not going to change the things that really make their lives difficult. So I think there's a certain amount of fantasy and wish fulfilment in substituting participatory approaches for meeting basic needs.