



International development: challenges for a world in transition

The Achievement

Narrator:

In spite of these criticisms, Teddy also told me that he thought that Robert Chambers has been the most influential thinker on development management practice over the past decade. And he regards the debate around his work as having been a positive step. Ramya Subramanian, and Peter Louisos would accept this. Chambers has created a space for interrogating assumptions and re-thinking policies, which virtually everyone concerned with development issues would regard as beneficial.

Perhaps it has needed someone like him burning with an almost quixotic idealism to do this. Whatever the contradictions in this position, it is now much less likely than it was, that the views of those who are the targets of development interventions will be entirely ignored. To a considerable extent this has been Robert's achievement.

But isn't this also a contradiction. Robert has pointed to the need to be open to the perspectives of those who have been overlooked. He has wanted all voices to be heard. But in practice it tends to be his voice that is listened to. Rather unfairly, I asked him about this.

RC:

You can say not putting forward your own ideas is an agenda. Yes, it is. Enabling other people to express their ideas to do their own analysis is an agenda. Yes, it is. Coming in with your own ideas at a later stage and sharing them, is a way of relating. Yes, it is. And I think it's not too bad a way of going about things. But we're all fumbling. And trying to feel our way forward. And to find better ways of doing things. And I don't think there are any ultimate answers about this, or any other aspects of human behaviour.

Narrator:

But you've been incredibly successful at promoting your ideas. You might say they're not your ideas. But they're associated with you. You're one of the most successful academics working in the field of development in the UK. You're somebody who is known about anywhere, where there are aid agencies working. Doesn't that sort of contradict the argument that you're presenting? In a sense that you've been successful in promoting your ideas, maybe through listening.

RC:

I find it very inhibiting to be told that people may take me seriously. It's really quite a problem. I find I'm more and more hesitate to write anything now. Because of the danger that it will be taken more seriously than it deserved. So to challenge, to be like me, is even more acute than it is to others. Not to dominate, but to continue to try to behave, to find ways of behaving in a way in which enables other people to speak and express their realities, without deferring to somebody like me.