

## THE FINAL DEATHBLOW TO DEVELOPMENT PLANNING? A comparative book review of Easterly's 'The Tyranny of Experts' and Ramalingam's 'Aid on the Edge of Chaos'

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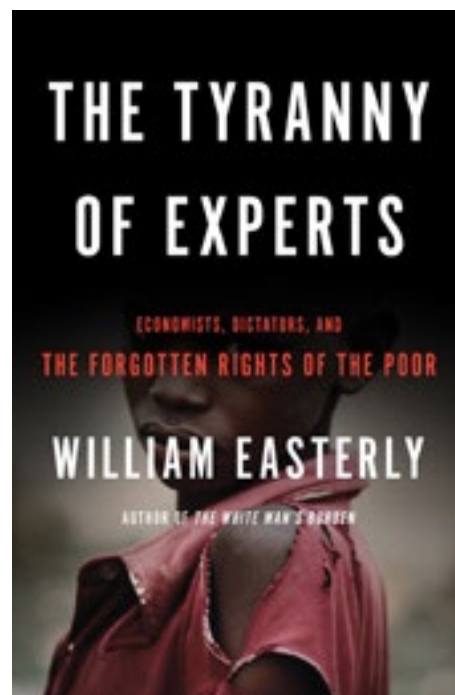
When New York University Professor William Easterly released his best-seller *The White Man's Burden*, it was described by Simon Maxwell, then director of think tank ODI, as the only book in a chain of recent works that dared to go against what he called 'the inevitable social-democratic consensus... that aid is a worthwhile undertaking but could be better' (Maxwell, 2007). The year was 2007 and the aid community was still head-in-clouds after the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness 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 generally uplifting publications by the likes of Jeffrey Sachs (2005), Stephen Browne (2006) and Roger Riddell (2007), which shared their respective views on how to achieve greater aid effectiveness.

Now fast forward to 2014 and witness the change in tune. With consecutive monitoring surveys having shown abysmal progress on the implementation of Paris Declaration principles and faced with a post-crisis world where trade and investment from emerging economies gain ever-more importance, Western aid agencies look tormented. This new context has again triggered a string of books on the future of aid and development, with a much darker undertone however. Dambisa Moyo (2009) might have started this movement when she famously declared aid to be 'dead', a post-colonial relic effective only in propping up corrupt dictators. Here we review two of the latest additions to the increasingly gloomy-looking aid and development literature.

### **Main arguments of the two books**

Bill Easterly's latest book, *The Tyranny of Experts*, is in fact not about aid as such. Remarkably, it does not mention once all-time arch-rival and development aid 'planner' Sachs. On several occasions, Easterly 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 builds his narrative around what he calls the 'consensus view' in development practice, i.e., that poverty is a problem amenable to technical fixes, an idea that cemented itself during the interwar period and has never been seriously challenged. Subscribing to this view, self-acclaimed development experts, which include not only aid agency staff, but also Western politicians, NGOs and philanthropists, bestow power and legitimacy upon what they consider to be 'benevolent autocrats' (read: dictators and domestic elites) that, with the experts' help, will implement the technical solutions deemed necessary. Avoiding opposition and stalemate, strongmen can deliver those solutions more efficiently than democracies, the logic goes. That the economic and political rights of development's ultimate beneficiaries are often trampled in the process is of second order.



According to Easterly, this tyranny of experts passes by and reinforces the real cause of deprivation: 'the unchecked power of the state against poor people without rights'. The book may avoid referring to Sachs, but does not shun away from picking individual fights. Bill Gates, Tony Blair, Paul Kagame, and Meles Zenawi are among the many villains populating Easterly's storyline.

In *Aid at the Edge of Chaos*, Ben Ramalingam, an independent consultant and researcher, seems to largely agree with Easterly on the grand failure of the expert approach to development, while focusing more narrowly on the aid industry and without pointing fingers to anyone in particular. Throughout the book, Ramalingam tries his best at tearing apart the positivist mechanical practices of minutely planning, targeting, measuring and evaluating development outcomes, something which has become endemic to modern-day aid. Drawing on complexity theory, he shows how our attempts at applying home-grown experiences to developmental problems elsewhere always fall short due to our infinite lack of knowledge about the local complex and multifaceted reality in which these problems are situated. Key in Ramalingam's argument is his conviction that this knowledge gap is inherently insurmountable. Even the most careful attempt at mapping social reality will not allow for a planned approach that can be executed with Fordist precision. Due to its rather unsuccessful track record, Ramalingam believes the aid system has currently reached a state of criticality. At this 'edge of chaos' the system's ability to learn and adapt is at its highest level, with small ripples potentially having a strong impact on its future directions.

So where does this leave us? What do both authors propose should change? Although Easterly reserves much more words for his criticisms of the technocratic approach to development than for what ought to replace it, the last few chapters of his book point to his faith in 'spontaneous solutions' that emerge through experimentation, market competition and learning-by-doing. He positions himself as a champion of societies marked by individual freedoms, where ideas and technology can flow freely from the bottom up and which through signals such as prices and ballot box results provide feedback and hold local economic

and political problem-solvers accountable for their actions. One could be forgiven for reading in this the textbook example of a liberal market democracy.

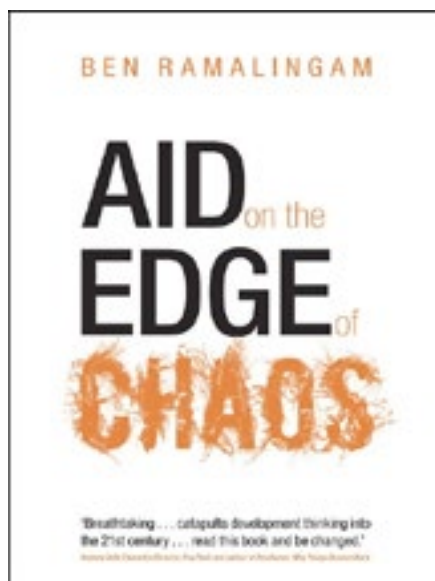
For Ramalingam, the bankruptcy of expert-oriented development implies that the aid industry should accept its inability to directly attribute to impact. Donors have to think more in terms of 'catalytic aid', which does not create development per se, but expands and sustains the space for positive change. Much like Easterly, Ramalingam believes that the true development experts are the individuals in the South themselves. Unlocking their potential will require two important changes in aid. First, donors will have to accept a more experimental approach to aid, testing interventions at different levels of the complex system and taking note of the interactions that promote or hamper the intended progress. Contrary to current 'best-practicitis', experimentation allows ample room for failure, a point also made by Easterly. Second, the aid community also needs to change its methodology, from what now sometimes displays a physics envy. Concepts like linearity or averages are ill-suited for the 'wicked problems' that aid agencies attract like magnets, says Ramalingam; highly unpredictable and interdependent problems influenced by the irrational actions of all sorts of actors. Ramalingam argues we should give more attention to outliers. Looking at positively deviating cases among mothers fighting malnutrition, for example, will help us discover the self-organising capacity of people in the South as they try to navigate the complex adaptive system in which they live. Network theory can act as the 'killer app' to dig deeper into social reality's idiosyncrasies.

### **Strong points**

Both books rightly point at a number of sore points and strange quirks in development thinking. Easterly is at his best when he describes technocrats' obsession with the fate of nations rather than nationals, an expression of which is the popular image of skilled migration as brain drain, literally the 'loss of brains' to the sending country, rather than as a deliberate and often successful coping strategy by individuals and their families. Indeed, worldwide restrictions on migration may well be the clearest example of technocrats' neglect of individual rights.

Another particularly interesting part is that on 'benevolent autocrats', where Easterly draws on Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman's (2011) work to lay bare the psychological biases, heuristics and attribution errors that, together with measurement error in growth rates, lead us to over- and misinterpret the links between autocratic leaders and economic development.

Ramalingam excels when he explains that donor impact is next to impossible in a complex adaptive system, a provocative but potentially game-changing idea. Unlike Easterly however, he still



believes aid has an important role to play as a catalyst for development. The consequence of these seemingly conflicting arguments is that donors should focus on measuring only those things they can actually contribute to. Trying to quantify impact, like progress on gender equality or democratisation creates the wrong incentives and overstates aid's ability to influence. Also Ramalingam's focus on outliers rather than averages is refreshing. All too often outliers are treated as unwanted results that mess up nice regression results. Ramalingam, however, points to them as sources of knowledge about complex adaptive systems' hidden features.

### **Weaker points**

In conflating experts and autocratic leaders as technocrats, Easterly makes a caricature of the development community, as does Ramalingam

from time to time. Nowadays, and perhaps increasingly, much effort goes into supporting civil society, bottom-up democratisation processes, and integrating developing countries and their citizens into global markets. Also, more and more development 'experts' do speak up and withdraw their support when human rights or political participation principles are violated. At the same time, ownership and participation have become key pillars of donor discourse. Ramalingam quickly discards all current forms of ownership and participation in the aid system as hollow expressions but bases such broad stroke conclusions on very little evidence.

Easterly's argument could easily be (mis)interpreted as advocacy for a minimal state and maximum market mechanisms, even if he explicitly states that this is not his point and that he wants to avoid repeating the old state-versus-market deliberation. His flirting with the ideas of libertarian economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek does no good to keep a clean distinction between the debate on freedom and rights for the poor versus technocratic development on the one hand, and the state intervention versus free markets debate on the other. In leaning strongly towards the latter side, Easterly's account appears to go against a large literature that emphasises the importance that strong states and trade protection had in the development of much of the West and South East Asia. True, as Ramalingam would surely point out, simple mimicry of those strategies by developing countries may not be advisable. But ignoring such historical pathways seems in itself a prime example of the very ahistorical 'blank slate' approach to development that Easterly criticises. In particular, when in the context of Korea's development and the rise of Hyundai, he writes that "the success of a "country" at specialization is really the success of a firm; the success of a firm is really the success of an individual. Korea's success at exporting automobiles is traceable to... Chung Ju Yung and his auto-repair shop", he falls prey to the same attribution errors and search for heroes that he battles against in debunking the benevolent autocrats myth.

After reading through the many problems that both books so aptly highlight, it is disappointing to see how few practical solutions they actually bring to the table. Easterly's book completely

avoids the hard question of how outsiders should engage with autocratic leaders, if at all. We are not convinced that a hands-off approach, which seems to follow logically (if implicitly) from Easterly's conceptualisation of individual rights, would be the best way forward. There is no real discussion of where rights come from or what would help the poor to acquire them. In a similar fashion, Ramalingam devotes an entire section of his book to complexity theory concepts, but struggles with the translation into practice. Often he uses management lingo and hollow-sounding phrases like 'donors have to become gardeners' or 'we have to move from experimentation as a tool to experimentation as a mindset' to obscure his inability to come up with ways in which such changes could be facilitated. His book does not investigate the problems related to donors' incentive structures that might stand in the way of adopting experimental approaches. Moreover, Ramalingam remains on the surface of why exactly experimentation would yield much better results and which forms it might take. It is also unclear who should decide on the experiments to be rolled out. If designed at donor level, how would they differ from a planned approach to development? Do the last 60 years of development assistance not add up to a whole lot of experimentation as well, regardless of whether it was planned or not?



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