

Development through the eyes of a tyrant

I would never be so bold as to claim to be an expert – except when attempting to convince an embassy that I merit a visa. However, in the eyes of one of the most influential development economists of our time, I certainly fit the bill. Bill, as Professor Easterly is known, used his recent missive - *The Tyranny of Experts* – to decry the impact of technocratic expats flying around the world to deliver their solutions to the world's ills, ignorant of the rights of those that they seek to 'help'. However, I would seek to differentiate myself and those that seek to affect systemic change from the targets in Easterly's sights.

I am not a technocrat. I do not profess to know how to farm, manufacture or govern (however informally) more effectively than people in developing countries. I, together with the growing cabal of systemic change lobbyists, see development challenges as context specific and economically, politically, socially, and culturally nuanced problems with huge plurality in the underlying causes and, where done properly, systemic approaches analyse these problems as such.

A systemic approach to development is fully cognisant of the formal and informal norms that influence personal freedoms and development outcomes. Development intervention does not have a strong track record in altering societal fundamentals such as political systems, and arguably neither do military or foreign policy interventions. The only areas where development can claim to have contributed to such objectives is through the economic development of middle classes who are then more empowered to influence political systems. That is not to say that development has been successful in affecting economic change overall, but where success has been achieved it can be seen to have contributed to political empowerment to some degree.

If we 'experts' in systemic approaches to development do not offer technical solutions, then, what exactly do we add? My answer to that is twofold. Firstly, with the benefit of a western education and the power of critical thinking and analytical capacity that comes with it, I am able to evaluate local systems and assess how they might be altered to the benefit of the poor in a sustainable way, utilising the incentives and capacities of local actors. To do this I have the backing of donors that allows me the luxury of a relative neutrality or outsider's perspective which the actors operating as part of a system in a developing country cannot have.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly from Easterly's perspective, I know development to have what the book argues to be a century of failures to its name. Distortion and undermining of local systems is just one of the ways that development has retarded growth. I also know that development is an inevitable and immovable product of the prevailing political economy of *the North* in the short to medium term. I consider it inarguable that systemic change represents a better form of development than the alternatives, with a minimum mandate of doing no harm. I actually believe that such programmes can provide sustainable, scalable benefits to poor people, despite the often restrictive political environment in which they are forced to operate.

In my *expert* opinion, while development has failed and experts have certainly had a hand in that, there is a need to separate the concept of experts from how they choose to exercise their expertise.