

Still Putting the Last First: Recasting development through the work of Robert Chambers

Foreword to the 2022 open access edition of A. Cornwall and I. Scoones (eds) *Revolutionizing Development: Reflections on the work of Robert Chambers*

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It is a turbulent time for international development. The Covid-19 pandemic, proven to be the long-awaited 'big one', has revealed cracks in the health, social, economic and political systems that we all depend on, with devastating impacts across the world. Climate and environmental change are devastating lives and livelihoods. Conflict and all-out war are resurgent phenomena, from Syria to Ukraine. Global economic, food and energy crises are following in their wake, with wide reverberations. Inequalities – across class, gender, race and place are rising and intersecting in new ways. Political shifts, from geo-political rivalries and responses to closing spaces for democracy and civil society are manifest in many settings. Digital technologies are opening up opportunities for rights and voice, but also closing them down and distorting them in dangerous ways.

Many of these dynamics are undoing 'development' in its broadest and simplest sense, as put so aptly by Robert Chambers, of 'good change'. They also reveal a world of disruption, contradiction and uncertainty. In this world, many of the tenets of 'mainstream' Development with a big D – the discourses and practices of the aid industry – no longer hold – if indeed they ever did. Long-dominant approaches, such as those promoting economic growth, market liberalisation, globalisation, carbon-intensive industries and command-and-control planning regimes, are now under challenge as never before. The idea that Development programmes can be designed in some places, usually by people and organisations with greater power and privilege, and then rolled out to others – always distasteful – now seems anathema indeed.

Yet – our current times also reveal some glimmers of hope for the future. Times of crisis can also open up opportunities to move ahead differently. Crises in development can open the way to recasting – both in the sense of re-working ideas and practices, and throwing forward, like a fisherperson casting a line. In charting new directions for the future, the work of Robert Chambers – always revolutionary, and starting differently, from people themselves and their own ideas of 'good change' and how to achieve it – offers some vital clues.

The book *Revolutionizing Development: Reflections on the work of Robert Chambers* was first published in 2011. Just over a decade later it is now being re-launched in fully [open access form](#), providing the opportunity for a wider range of readers around the world to understand Robert's contributions and legacy at this key moment for development, and build on these for the future. This re-publication has been made possible through kind support of the publishers, Routledge/Taylor and Francis, and of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), where we are privileged that Robert has based most of his incredible career, and where he remains a deeply loved and valued colleague. Edited by Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones, the book brings together more than thirty contributions from scholars and practitioners who have interacted directly with and appreciated Robert's work across the vast array of fields he has influenced, over many decades. The enthusiasm with which the original contributors came forward to contribute was a feature of the original version. To launch the open access version, there was again a massive, positive response to an invitation to highlight the current relevance of Robert's contributions, and how this could be built on for the future. The contributors include many renowned development researchers and practitioners. Many are still highly active, whilst others have reduced

their work or moved into other fields. But the desire of all to re-engage with Robert's insights signal their importance, and the value everyone places on his unique ideas, approaches and style. These updated reflections could not be included in the re-published book but were shared at a [launch event in April 2022](#).

The book's introductory chapter by Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones is aptly titled 'Putting the Last First'. Taken from the title of his 1983 book on rural development, this remains a fitting mantra for the fundamental revolution that Robert's work has inspired: to see and act differently, from the knowledge, perspectives and priorities of those sidelined and marginalised by dominant modes of power and privilege – including in mainstream science and development. It undergirded the revolution in participatory methodologies that Robert's work originally inspired, and which has blossomed in myriad ways all over the world. This was the book, read as a young and naïve undergraduate, that first drew me to Robert's work and to a research assistant role with him that paved the way for my own career at IDS. Putting the last first remains a commitment that has kept me here; going further than the 'Leave no-one behind' of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, it is more critically-engaged with power and more aligned with the commitments now enabled by today's lively debates on cognitive justice and 'decolonising development'.

As the introduction notes, the book relates a particular history of development in the post-World War II period – a biography, if you like – through the career history or biography of one of its key thinkers. Thus, 'contributors trace a story that stretches from Robert's posting as a District Officer in the colonial government of Kenya in the 1950s via work on irrigation management, rural livelihoods and agricultural research and in the promotion of participatory approaches in development, to his ... Engagement with Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS)' (p. 1). The introduction, and the book as a whole, provide a history that is personal in several senses. The contributors all worked closely with Robert at some time and in one way or another, developing personal as well as intellectual and practical engagements – interactions that many of them relate with the warmth, humour and irreverence that is part of Robert's own style. Many contributions recognise the importance of personal positionality in shaping what we know and how we come to know it; a theme so often elaborated in Robert's work. And many engage with Robert's emphasis on the importance of personal behaviour and power in shaping change; a conviction that coloured so much of Robert's work, and perhaps relates to his own background, experiences and family interests in psychoanalytic theory. Indeed perhaps from such roots, Robert's work was remarkably early and prescient in its emphasis on positionality and reflexivity – in the last few decades of course a stock-in-trade in development studies as across the social sciences.

The book's contributions are grouped into four broad parts: Conceptualizing Development; Rural Development, Poverty and Livelihoods; Methodological Innovations, and Practicing Development: New Professionalism. Each covers a range of themes, topics and insights that were revolutionary in their time and place, offering new ways of thinking and acting, and often creating wholly new paradigms. Taken together with Robert's vast corpus of publications, listed by decade at the end of the book, they add up to a kaleidoscope of ideas and insights that have led and catalysed some of the most important work in development and development studies over the last period. From seasonality to sustainable livelihoods, indigenous technical knowledge to irrigation, trees as assets to poverty and vulnerability traps, and the plethora of perspectives and methods around participation, learning and un-learning, professionalism and humility, the themes in Robert's work addressed in the book were all novel at their moment, and have retained lasting value.

The decade since the book was published have also been enormously productive for Robert. As his close current colleagues in the Sanitation Learning Hub hosted at IDS note, he has continued to help champion and spread different ideas and methods that have revolutionised the sanitation sector worldwide. He has championed the crucial link between sanitation, nutrition and stunting, and publicised the work of others to highlight the importance of sanitation and environmental cleanliness for child development. His work on the deprivation trap in 1983 has been repurposed for the sanitation

sector to understand clusters of disadvantage and highlight how factors compound to affect people's ability to construct, access, use or maintain a toilet. He has continued to be a vocal advocate for empowering community-based action and stresses the need for implementers and researchers to focus on those most likely to be left behind – and to put them first – at every opportunity. He has also advocated for people to share and learn from failure. The sanitation sector now has its own WASH Failures Team and the Nakuru Accord where water, sanitation and hygiene professionals can sign-up to promote transparency around failure. All the while, his general attitude, passion and enthusiasm has inspired others to engage, listen and enjoy themselves even when talking about human shit.

In parallel, he has continued to argue and illustrate that in development more broadly, to do better we need to 'know better'. His 2017 book of this title *Can We Know Better* elaborated his longstanding arguments that what we believe we know in international development is often distorted or unbalanced by errors, myths, biases and blind spots, now amidst the dominance of standardised methodologies such as randomized control trials, systematic reviews, and competitive bidding. Revisiting many of his earlier examples, he contrasts a paradigm in which the world is seen and understood as controllable with a paradigm of complexity which recognizes that the real world of social processes and power relations is messy and unpredictable. Again, to confront the challenges of complex and emergent realities requires revolutionary approaches: in methodologies, professionalism and personal behaviour.

Looking ahead, what does Robert's work and insights – as captured in the book, and in his work since – offer for the future? In short, an enormous amount. Indeed, many clues are offered for the directions and leaps that can help the re-casting of development now needed. In keeping with Robert's own insistence on positionality, plurality and the personal, readers will need to reflect on these for themselves, and make them relevant to their own contexts and commitments. Yet it is possible to point to some broad ways in which Robert's ideas and legacy are now more relevant than ever.

First, amidst the disruptions and shocks of our current era – from climate change and pandemics to conflict and economy – Robert's insights around complexity are vital. These are matters involving non-linear, emergent change, systems of interacting pressures, and deep uncertainties. More than ever, a paradigm emphasising control and predictability will not do; for any of these global challenges, and especially if we are to address how they interact with each other and with realities on the ground in particular places, methodologies and practices of the kind Robert's work highlights so well, stressing adaptation, iteration and learning-by-doing, will be sorely needed.

Second, poverty and inequality are on the rise in many parts of the world, both South and North. Deepened and entrenched by economic, health and environmental crises and change, today's inequities are intersecting – where class, race, gender, place, ability, and more shape people's vulnerabilities and opportunities. Robert's insights about multi-dimensional poverty are highly relevant in this context, whilst some of his earliest insights about downward spirals of deprivation seem now to have new and frightening traction. At the same time, Robert's work constantly reminds us of the capacity and agency of people living in even the most extreme forms of poverty and marginalisation to be agents rather than victims, and to analyse and act on their own situations – when enabled to do so and not blocked by misguided outsiders.

Third, climate and environmental change make Robert's fundamental insights about rural worlds and rural development more vital than ever. Understanding rural dynamics around livelihoods, vulnerability, seasonality, the use of land, water and trees – as Robert's work has illustrated so well – will be critical to finding pathways to sustainable development that suit people's realities. Appreciating people's own knowledge and innovations – in farming, natural resource management, addressing environmental problems as locally framed and understood – in a refreshed, future vision of the 'Farmer First' paradigms that Robert and others pioneered – offers a valuable counter and alternative to the top-down 'solutions' currently being peddled to address climate change and biodiversity loss. And in the environmental arena, today more than ever, the kinds of biases and blindspots that Robert's work has

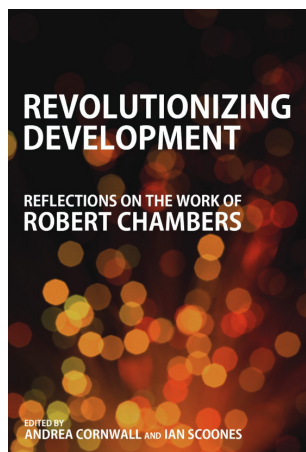
always challenged seem alive and well; we need Robert's revolutionary ideas and zeal to call them out, and find alternatives.

Finally, questions about the relationship between science and policy, knowledge and decision-making, and truth and trust are sharper than ever. Linear ideas that development policy follows 'evidence' unproblematically have always been problematic – there has always been a politics of knowledge and policy processes at play. Yet the proliferation of digital media and un-locatable opinions, blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, and the spreading of lies and fake news by those in authority, magnify challenges around 'whose knowledge counts' – or whether knowledge counts at all. Robert's work has always sustained an optimistic conviction that people can learn differently, and that this will encourage them to do differently. This makes today's 'post-truth' world, in which power and dishonesty too often align, all the more appalling. Robert's work also reminds us how power and knowledge go hand-in-hand, that power can corrupt and distort, and that challenging such relations cannot be a matter of restoring singular truths. Instead, it requires the fostering of plural perspectives and democratic deliberation, including from the margins. Given the likely challenges ahead in a world of disruption, the concepts, methodologies and practices to do this are vital, and again Robert's work offers much-needed clues.

In sum, this foreword, and the book itself, are a vote of thanks, and a celebration. Thank you Robert for an extraordinary legacy, and an ongoing set of ideas and commitments that are both personal and unique, yet also of such broad relevance. As we think forwards to recasting development for the future, may the insights continue to inspire and may the revolutionary spirit continue.

Melissa Leach, IDS, April 2022.

About the book



The book *Revolutionizing Development Reflections on the Work of Robert Chambers* edited By Andrea Cornwall and Ian Scoones is now fully open access and can be read for free from the [publishers website](#).

This book tells the story of development studies in practice over the last 50 years through the work of one remarkable individual – Robert Chambers. His work has taken him from being a colonial officer in Kenya through training and managing large rural development projects to a fundamental critique of top-down development and the championing of participatory approaches.

The contributors eloquently demonstrate how he has been at the centre of major shifts in development thinking and practice over this period, popularising terms that are now at the centre of the development lexicon such as vulnerability, multi-dimensional poverty, sustainable livelihoods and "farmer first". Robert Chambers played a major role in the massive growth in participatory approaches to development, and particularly the application of participatory methods in development research and appraisal.

This has led to fundamental challenges to development practice, ranging from approaches to monitoring and evaluation to institutional learning and professional training. There is probably no-one who has had more influence on approaches to development in the past decades.

Revolutionizing Development book offers a unique overview of these contributions in 32 concise chapters from authors who have been intimately involved as collaborators, critics and colleagues of Robert Chambers.