



Book Review

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Title of the Book:

Rural Development: Putting the Last First

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Robert Chambers

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Abstract: This is a review of a book 'Rural Development, Putting the Last First', by Robert Chambers. The author stresses on the need to fight rural poverty by avoiding rural biases. He outlined six biases that rural development experts, researchers and policy makers should avoid. These are: Spatial biases with sub-biases on urban, tarmac and roadside; project bias in which case attention is put to areas which are somewhat developed and person bias. Other biases include dry season bias, the tendency of experts to visit rural areas during the dry season; diplomatic biases where people who report about rural life tend to hide the reality of the people to the superiors; and lastly is professional biases, Chambers argues that professional training, values and interests imparts biases about the rural life. The author, named experts and other people who work on rural poverty only from outside as 'outsiders'. According to Chambers Rural poverty is often unseen or misperceived by outsiders. Outsiders are the people concerned with rural development who are themselves neither rural nor poor, this group include academic researchers, aid agency personnel, bankers, businessmen, consultants, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, politicians, priests, school teachers staff of training institutes, workers in voluntary agencies, and other professionals. The principal objective of rural development must be the eradication of rural poverty and its underlying causes; this can be achieved through avoiding the six biases. The purpose of this review was to assess whether the book is still valid today given socio-economic changes that has happened globally. The review has confirmed that, the message from this book is still valid today especially in developing countries where more poor people live in rural areas and depend on agriculture. The book is particularly suitable in teaching rural development and development studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Key words: Rural, development, biases, outsiders, poverty

1. Introduction

In his book 'Rural Development, Putting the Last First' Chambers, emphasize the need to fight rural poverty by avoiding rural biases. He named experts and other people who work on rural poverty only from outside as 'outsiders'. According to Chambers Rural poverty is often unseen or misperceived by outsiders. Outsiders are the people concerned with rural development who are themselves neither rural nor poor, this group include academic researchers, aid agency personnel, bankers, businessmen, consultants, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, politicians, priests, school teachers staff of training institutes, workers in voluntary agencies, and other professionals (p.2). He further argues that outsiders rarely appreciate the richness and validity of rural people's knowledge or the hidden nature of rural poverty. Chambers argues that outsiders often fail to design and implement proper rural development interventions because they are trapped in the "urban trap" that draws professionals away from rural areas and up through the hierarchy of urban and international centres.

They are attracted and held fast by better houses, hospitals, schools, communications, consumer goods, recreation, social services, and facilities for work, salaries, and career prospects. Chambers argues further that in third world countries as elsewhere, academics, bureaucrats, foreigners, and journalists are all drawn to towns or based on them, hence being victims of the 'urban trap' (p. 7).

The author contests the resource flow within developing countries; his argument is that resources being it funds, human or knowledge in developing countries follow the global trend of 'core and periphery'. He termed urban areas as 'cores' and rural areas as 'peripheries'. According to him, there is an imbalance in how the system operates both internationally and within individual third world countries; centripetal forces draw resources and educated people from the peripheries towards the cores. Within third world countries, skills migrate from rural to urban areas and from smaller to larger urban centres, feeding, in turn, the international flow of the brain drain. The centripetal system is self-reinforcing. He emphasizes that even research and



development (R and D) expenditure follows a similar trend, to him rural poverty deserves a higher priority than defence, yet it is surprising that more than 50% of the research scientists in the world engage in the defence work (p.4). This argument by Chambers is very difficult to criticize especially now that rural to urban migration in Africa and other developing countries is on increase. For many centuries, people have been moving from rural to urban areas, and across national borders in search of better opportunities. Of the 250 million international migrants (2018 est.), approximately 200 million (2018 est.) (IFAD, 2018); leave home to work and send remittances home to their families (The International Migration Report, 2017). What perhaps Chambers forgot was the power of remittances; the migrants send money back home which if properly managed can be used to finance rural development interventions. Remittances are funds transferred from migrants to their home country. They are the private savings of workers and families that are spent in the home country for food, clothing and other expenditures, and which drive the home economy.

Workers' remittances are a significant part of international capital flows, especially with regard to labour-exporting countries. For example, in 2014, \$436 billion went to developing countries, setting a new record (ILO, 2019). Overall global remittances totaled \$582 billion in 2015. Some countries, such as India and China, receive tens of billions of US dollars in remittances each year from their expatriates and Diaspora. In 2014, India received an estimated \$70 billion and China an estimated \$64 billion. These figures do not include "internal remittances" from individuals who reside in large towns within the developing world due to complex procedures of calculation. For many developing nations, remittances from citizens working abroad provide an import source of much-needed funds (Akter, 2018). In some cases, funds from remittances exceed aid sent from the developed world and are only exceeded by foreign direct investment (FDI). Perhaps the challenge with remittances is on management (Onyeisi, *et al.*, 2018)

2. Key Theme of the Book and its Applicability to the Existing Situation

The main theme of this book is 'rural neglect'. In this book chapter, I argue that the main theme of this book is still valid and applicable in today's context of developing countries. In his book, Chambers explains the neglect of the rural areas using the six biases. According to him, we can only develop the rural areas if we avoid biases. The six biases are explained in chapter one of the book from page 13 to 27 as follows:

First is, spatial biases (urban, tarmac and roadside): Officials reside in urban areas (outsiders) go and learn about the rural areas through the medium of vehicles on tarmac roads and return by vehicles, hence only the roadside are seen. The urban bias involves of concentration of rural visits near towns and especially near capital cities and large administrative centres, while the regional distribution of the

poorest rural people often shows a concentration in remote areas. Examples are North-Eastern Brazil, Zambia away from the railway line, lower Ukambani in Kenya, the Tribal districts of central India and the Hills of Nepal (p.13). The urban bias is also vividly seen in Tanzania, Bagamoyo and Kisarawe district is perhaps the most researched district in the country. Many researchers from the University of Dar-es-salaam which until 1984 was the only university in the country conduct their studies there, no wonder the University of Dar-es-salaam is populated with the post-graduate thesis from studies conducted in and near Bagamoyo and Kisarawe districts. Quite interesting, researchers from the Sokoine University of Agriculture also conduct most of their studies in Mvomero, Kilosa and Ifakara these areas may not have many poor people because they all characterized by commercial agriculture where large farms and out-growers are found (see Kajembe *et al.*, 2013; Mwasha, 2016; Mazigo *et al.*, 2017). The very poor areas such as districts of Singida, Rukwa, Kigoma, and Manyara receive very little attention.

Tarmac and roadside biases also direct attention towards those who are less poor and away from those who are poorer. This is because visible developments follow the main roads. Factories, offices, shops and official markets all tend to at the sides of the main roads. Even agricultural development has a roadside bias. When roads are built, land values rise and those who are wealthier and more influential often move in if they can (p.14). This is a true fact, for example, many factories in Tanzania concentrate along the Dar-es-salaam to Morogoro road Dar-es-salaam to Mtwara (Kilwa road), and the main reason is that value of the land on Morogoro road is higher than that of Kilwa road. In Uganda, the factories, shops, farms, and other developments are concentrated along the Kampala – Mukono to Jinja road and that of Kampala – Entebbe than other places. A similar trend is seen in almost all African Countries. The concentration of official visits and studies in these areas is actually attracted by development than lack of it.

Second is project bias. Chambers also noted that rural development tourism and researchers have a project bias in which case attention is put to areas that are somewhat developed. For instance, in Tanzania, during ujamaa, the ujamaa villages were centre of attractions; experts were attracted by achievements not lack of achievements. Project bias in views of Chambers is mostly marked with the showpiece. i.e. the nicely groomed pet project or model villages, especially staffed and supported with well-briefed members who know what to say and which is sited a reasonable but not excessive distance from the urban headquarters (p.16).

Third, the author speaks of "person bias" that persons who give information about the rural are biased against the poor people; sub-biases in this category include elite bias, male bias, user and adopter biases, active, present and living biases. Elite is used here to refer to those rural people who



are less poor and more influential. They include progressive farmers, village leaders, headmen, traders, religious leaders, teachers and paraprofessionals (p.18). They are the main source of information for rural development tourists, for local-level officials, and even for rural researchers. The poorer people are a residual, the last in the line, the most difficult to find, and the hardest to learn from. Unless paupers and poverty are deliberately and persistently sought, they tend to remain effectively screened from outside inquiries. Besides, most local-level government staff, researchers and other visitors are men. Most rural people with whom they establish contacts are men. Female farmers are neglected by male agricultural extension workers (p.19). Similarly, where visits are concerned with facilities or innovations, the user of the service and the adopters of new practice or technology are more likely to be seen than are non-users and non-adopters. Also, those who are active are more visible than those who are not. Fit, children gather around the Jeep or Land Rover, not those who are apathetic, weak and miserable, dead children are rarely seen or remembered.

Fourth is the 'dry season bias'. Experts normally go to rural areas during the dry season the reasons they give is that roads are impassable during the wet/rainy season, food prices are high, it's time for cultivation and infectious diseases are prevalent. Research has established that most of the poor rural people in the world live in areas of marked wet-dry tropical reasons. For the majority whose livelihoods depend on farming the most difficult time of the year is usually the wet season, especially before the first harvest and is the time when they get very few visits. During this time, food is scarce, food prices are high, work is hard, and infections are prevalent. Consequently, malnutrition, morbidity, and mortality all rise, while body weights decline. The poorer people, women, children and the disabled are particularly vulnerable. Birth weights drop and infant mortality rises. This is what he called 'the hungry season and the sick season' (p.20).

The fifth is the category of 'diplomatic biases'. Tendencies to hide the reality of the people to the superiors, i.e. leaders who know about rural problems simply report as 'no problem' to their superiors. Chambers noted that urban-based visitors are often deterred by a combination of politeness and timidity from approaching, meeting, and listening to and learning from the poorer people. He argues that poverty in any country can be a subject of indifference or shame, something to be shut out, something polluting, something, in the psychological sense, to be repressed. Likewise, senior officials visiting the junior officials may not wish to examine or expose failures of programmes intended to benefit the poor. Politeness and prudence variously inhibit the awkward questions, which walk into the poorer quarter of the village, the discussion with the working women, the interviews with Harijans. Courtesy and cowardice combine to keep tourists and the poorer apart (p. 22).

The sixth and final set of bias involves 'professional biases' (p.22-23). Professional training, values, and interests impart

biases. Sometimes they focus attention on the less poor. For example, agricultural extension staff trained to advise on cash crops or to prepare farm plans are drawn to the more "progressive" farmers; historians, sociologists, and administrators, especially when short of time, can best satisfy their interests and curiosity through informants among the better –educated or less poor; those engaged in family welfare and family planning work find that bases for the adoption of any new practices can most readily be established with better-off, better-educated families.

As noted, before, biases are socially constructed and have multiple causes and each category requires appropriate methods. Biases that are based on ignorance are easy to eradicate i.e. gender biases- gender-based education is required. Biases against poor farmers are addressed at the policy level, design policies in favour of poor farmers. Governments are encouraged to enact laws that prohibit the unnecessary transfer of workers from rural areas and institute incentives such as hard work environment allowances these may attract and retain professionals in rural areas.

The principal objective of rural development must be the eradication of rural poverty and its underlying causes. Chambers put five major things critical for rural life: poverty (having few assets), physical weakness (more dependents than able-bodied adults), isolation (the household is isolated from the outside world, remote areas with no means of communication), vulnerability and powerlessness. To him all are important but vulnerability and powerlessness deserve more recognition and analysis. Vulnerability reflects a lack of buffers against contingencies such as dowry, bride wealth, weddings and funerals, disasters, sickness, etc (p.115). Powerlessness is reflected in the ease with which rural elites act as a net to intercept benefits intended for the poor, in the way the poor are robbed and cheated (p. 131-139).

Urban-based professionals need to prioritize and strategize on the need and views of the poor rural people. Chambers argues that for those who are neither rural nor poor should know the priorities of those who are both poor and deprived. They are isolated, uncommunicative, rarely asked about their views, frequently masked by others and selectively perceived. The silent ought to be heard. An indirect approach may help, drawing on social science research, especially case studies of social anthropologists and social workers, and agricultural economists' understanding of the behaviour of the poor farmers. He argues further that, on the basis of such evidence something can be said about what poor people want, inferring their priorities from what they do as much as, or even more than, from what they say (p.142). Chambers is arguing for the new professional approach of 'reversals' or 'putting the last first' (p.168). These reversals have many dimensions, they include, for example, pricing policies, and rural-urban terms of trade. Three reversals deserve special attention because they combine potential impact with feasibility. They concern reversals in space, in professional values and in specialization (p.169). Reversals in space concern the present concentration of skills, wealth and powers in the cores, draining and depriving the peripheries. Chambers is promoting decentralization efforts that have the



potential to reverse the situation (P.170). Likewise, the values and preferences of professionals are, then, a point of entry. The damage done by university education is easily underestimated, not least because those whose opinions matters are initiates themselves, and have a vested interest in the inculcation and embedding of professional values (p.171). To reverse these biases Chambers propose the use of 'multi-disciplinarity' approach in academic works this is what he calls the 'new professionalism' (p.185).

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this book review was to assess whether the book is still valid today given socio-economic changes that have happened globally. I can confirm that the message from this book is still valid today especially in developing countries where more poor people are found in rural areas and depend on agriculture. Likewise, the book is resourceful in teaching development studies at a university level and mostly courses related to rural and community development at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I particularly use this book in teaching students who pursue community economic development degree programmes on courses that relate to rural development. The book is also useful to policymakers and researchers concerned with rural development, especially in developing countries. The central theme of the book is on 'six biases' and 'outsiders' culture and how to reverse them. The author used simple English but so elaborative and he has tried to illustrate his arguments with live examples from the third world. This book is very much alive and will continue to influence rural development talks for many years to come.

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