

Poverty Professionals and Poverty *

By

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“...it would seem that it is we the professionals, the powerful and the influential, and those who attend roundtables and summits, who have to reconstruct our reality, to change as people....” (Chambers, 1995, pp 203-204).

Robert Chambers has had a profound influence on my thinking as a development professional. His 1995 paper, “Poverty and Livelihoods: Whose Reality Counts?” was an eye-opener for me. His constant reminder that the “realities of poor people are local, complex, diverse and dynamic”¹, and his pioneering of the methods of participatory poverty appraisal to bring out these realities, are major contributions to development studies. They certainly had an effect on this economist, well schooled in the discipline’s deductive/empiricist/quantitative methods, with perhaps unthinking allegiance to its epistemology. I still remain a card carrying economist, fully aware of the power and reach of my discipline, and ready to defend it against ignorant or envious attacks by those who cannot understand it or master it. But the epistemological basis of my discipline, and its attendant weaknesses, are clearer to me now than they were when I first became a professional economist.² Indeed, perhaps the greatest weakness of economists is that we do not fully understand the weaknesses of our discipline.

In all of this, Robert’s writings and his example have been my guides. There are others, of course. My interaction with the Exposure and Dialogue Program (EDP), started by Karl Osner, and the inspirational example of Ela Bhatt and the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, have also been important. In recent years a group of us have engaged in the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Dialogue process—activists, sociologists, anthropologists and economists have met every twelve to eighteen months to discuss differences of perspective on analytical and policy issues affecting the poor, preceded by an immersion and exposure to the realities of their lives.³

These dialogues with Robert Chambers, Ela Bhatt, Karl Osner and others, some in person and some in the mind, have shaped the development professional I have become. I think a lot about how to

* Contribution to a Festschrift for Robert Chambers.

¹ Chambers (1995, p 173)

² Kanbur (2002), Kanbur and Shaffer (2007)

³ A good account of the EDP is to be found in Osner (2004); See Bhatt (2004) for SEWA’s perspective on the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Dialogue process; see also Kanbur (2009). The first compendium of write ups from the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Dialogue process is Chen et. al (2004). The most recent compendium is Bali et. al. (2009)

combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to poverty analysis, and how to bridge seemingly unbridgeable gaps between disciplines in the way that they approach and analyze development issues. How to get the “best of both worlds”⁴ from different perspectives is a constant concern of mine.

But there is one issue which remains, broached in their different ways by Chambers, Bhatt and Osner. This issue makes me uncomfortable within myself, takes me off my high moral perch when I talk (or lecture) to others about poverty, and it is an issue for which I do not have an answer. It is quite simply this—those of us, including me, who analyze poverty and discourse about poverty, seem to do rather well out of it. Working on poverty issues, whether in international agencies, in bilateral donor ministries, in academia, in think tanks, in foundations, or in many NGOs, has become a well defined career path, with ladders that one climbs and financial compensation to match. To be sure, the monetary compensation may not come close to that of the Wall Street Set or the Dalal Street Set. But the Development Set does fine, thank you very much. As Ross Coggins famously observed⁵:

*The Development Set is bright and noble
Our thoughts are deep, our vision global;
Although we move with the better classes
Our thoughts are always with the masses.*

It is extraordinary how Coggins’ satirical poem resonates more than three decades later, and now surfaces frequently in the development blogosphere. Thus in the December 4, 2008 entry on his blog, Owen Abroad: Thoughts from Owen in Africa (<http://www.owen.org/blog/116>), Owen Barder invoked the poem when he wrote:

“I’m just back from the Doha Financing for Development Conference.....One topic that occupied the negotiators for hours was whether the UN, or another body such as the G-20, should host the next meeting about the financial crisis. (*“Thus guaranteeing continued good eating / By showing the need for another meeting.”*) I estimated that the Financing for Development meeting cost about \$60 million....I have made myself a personal promise. I do not want to travel around the world telling poor countries what they should do and how they should change. I will concentrate on trying to persuade rich countries to change the policies and behaviours that make it difficult for the world’s poor to share that prosperity.”

For another blogger, Ponticulus Indica (<http://rahulbrown.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/the-development-set-by-ross-coggins/>), the Development Set poem set off a bout of self examination (perhaps self flagellation) on January 22, 2010:

“Though I am certainly a misfit among the development set, no amount of dirt under my nails or parasites in my gut make me much better at the apparent level. Visa stamps fill my passport nearly to the end, and I am guilty of outlandish dichotomies likes proposing to my wife in luxurious Rome before jetting off to the hinterlands of rural Orissa. A casual observer (or one prone to prevarication) might comment that there was equal probability of my presence around Los Angeles or San Francisco on any given weekend, if I was not already off on some jaunt to Washington DC, NYC, or Seattle.”

⁴ Chambers (2003)

⁵ Coggins (1976)

This issue is much deeper than the one I began with, on the dichotomy between economics and other disciplines, or between quantitative and qualitative approaches to poverty appraisal. This syndrome applies equally to pretty much all protagonists in any development debate. No matter how heated the debate, it usually takes place in salubrious surroundings (*In Sheraton Hotels in scattered nations/We damn multinational corporations*), and the professionalization and all that goes with it is clear on both sides of the table. My Cornell colleague, anthropologist Annelise Riles has pointed to the strong similarities between the groups on either side of the table in these gatherings. Not only are they professionals, but in a strong sense they are indeed part of the same community, bound by “a certain aesthetic of information of which the world of NGOs, nation states, international institutions, and networks is only one instantiation” (Riles, 2001, p2).

So, what are we to make of it from a moral, ethical perspective, this making of a (sometimes, very) good living at the World Bank while analyzing poverty and recommending policies to alleviate poverty, or opposing supposedly wicked policies of the World Bank from a Washington, DC, activist group, but making a good living doing so just the same? The dilemma is not new, of course. The term “Champagne socialism” was invented for a reason—the well to do feeling good by arguing why the wealth should be taken away from them to help the less fortunate.⁶ Or the Old Etonian George Orwell taking a trip to write about the North of England at the height of the depression in the 1930s, albeit that it produced a classic piece of literature in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Or, in modern times, Bill Gates spending away his billions on poverty reduction projects.

But in these cases, at least, the wealth came first and then the desire to reach out to the poor. And we can legitimately ask whether the philanthropy that it generates is a good enough reason to allow wealth to build to such staggering levels.⁷ What is striking about the class of poverty professionals (of whom I am one) is that the good living (granted, not at the billionaire or millionaire level, but pretty good nevertheless) is made through the very process of analyzing, writing, recommending on poverty. To me, at least, this is discomfiting and disconcerting. I feel slightly ashamed within myself when I turn up to a poverty conference (perhaps even one where I am the keynote speaker), having flown business class, staying in an expensive hotel and (sometimes) being paid handsomely for attending. I recall many years ago, when I was in my twenties, telling the anthropologist Mary Douglas about how I was starting to do consulting for the World Bank on poverty issues, and how important it was to do this work. “And it’s not too bad for one’s own poverty either, is it?” came her worldly, knowing, reply. The seeds of discomfort sown by that comment have germinated and taken root, and now won’t let go.

I recognize of course the paradoxes of making so much of my discomfort, with the implication that others should feel it too. First, it seems to let off the hook those who make a good living without attempting to help the poor in any way. Surely the moral dilemma of living well in the midst of poverty is one that should apply equally to all, and not particularly and peculiarly to poverty professionals? Why pick on those whose chosen profession is to help the poor, and berate them for doing well out of it? By

⁶ It was the 19th century philosopher Alexander Herzen who wrote “It is they, none other, who are dying of cold and hunger...while you and I in our rooms on the first floor are chatting about socialism ‘over pastry and champagne’” (Herzen, 1979).

⁷ Dasgupta and Kanbur (2010)

suggesting that their pay and benefits should not be “too high”, does this not penalize the children of the poverty professionals for their parents’ calling? Secondly, if highly skilled personnel are needed to attack poverty, then what’s wrong with paying the market rate for that skill? Surely the alternative is that these skilled professionals will find equally well paying jobs making widgets, and the attack on poverty will lose its best troops? Surely, the poor deserve the very best talent to address their needs?

And yet my doubts and discomforts remain. Yes, living well amidst poverty should be a dilemma for everyone. But am I wrong in thinking that it should be a problem particularly for those who live well out of attending meetings on poverty? At the very least the moral superiority that they (read I) might claim or feel because they work on poverty has to be tempered by the fact “it’s not too bad for one’s own poverty, is it?” Second, the market based arguments, leaving aside the delicious irony of market critics among the poverty professionals relying on it, depend on their actually being a market test. How many poverty professionals could really and truly get an equally well paying job in the private sector, say, even allowing for the specific human capital they have built up in the organization in which they work? This is an empirical question, of course, but I advance the hypothesis that pay among poverty professionals is better explained by distribution of economic rent than by a market process (or any process) that selects talent for poverty reduction and rewards it by results. There are, of course, individuals who have demonstrated that they could thrive in alternative settings, and have come to the calling of poverty reduction after achievements elsewhere. But as I noted earlier, increasingly, in agencies, in academia, in think tanks, in foundations and in NGOs, poverty professionals are on a cradle to grave career path within an organization, or to use Annelise Riles’s telling phrase, a network of organizations bound by “a certain aesthetic of information.”

So, what is to be done? There is no clean answer to the dilemma I have posed. Perhaps there is no answer at all. The tension resides in the very structures of operation, and the issue is perennial and perhaps primordial. Certainly, poverty professionals should not have to go around in sack cloth and ashes, or disadvantage their children, to retain the moral high ground. A certain, not excessive, amount of “good living” on their part, even at conferences and summits, can be tolerated and is perhaps unavoidable. But a partial response to the dilemma can be fashioned out of the writings and example of Ela Bhatt, Robert Chambers and Karl Osner.

The first step has to be to recognize the problem and to discuss and debate its nature and dimensions. Robert Chambers, in the quote at the beginning of this essay and in his writings generally, has highlighted how the professional and the personal are inextricably intertwined. Even an organization such as SEWA, founded by Ela Bhatt with Gandhian principles as its bedrock, faces the problems of professionalization as it expands—the problems of demonstrated success in this case. It needs accountants, bankers, organizers, those who can communicate with donor agencies at their level, and so on. SEWA faces the problem that the professionals who it needs to help its poor members will have incomes and lifestyles very different from the members. And this was the problem that was identified in a very different context by Karl Osner—he noted the progressive disconnect between the thought processes of staff in the German aid agencies from the realities of the poor people they were meant to be helping. Osner began the Exposure and Dialogue Program (EDP) as a response to this disconnect. SEWA is a host organization for EDPs for agency officials but, equally important, it also does EDPs for its

own professionals. Odd as it may seem, SEWA send its professionals to experience, however briefly, the life of the poor members of SEWA, the very people the professionals are meant to help.

My specific proposal, therefore, is that each poverty professional should engage in an “exposure” to poverty (also known as “immersions”) every 12 to 18 months. I do not mean by this rural sector missions for aid agency officials, nor the running of training workshops by NGO staff. What I mean is well captured by Eyben (2004); these are exercises that “are designed for visitors to stay for a period of several days, living with their hosts as participants, as well as observers, in their daily lives. They are distinct from project monitoring or highly structured ‘red carpet’ trips when officials make brief visits to a village or an urban slum....”

My own experience with the EDP has been moving, nourishing and intellectually stimulating and I recommend it as a personal goal for individuals, and an institutional goal for organizations. But I recognize, of course, that this is itself not problem free. Here are some of the issues that have been raised when I have talked about and advocated the EDP to different audiences.

*Isn't this just superficial exposure for a few days; isn't it just “poverty tourism”? Yes, it is superficial in a fundamental sense because we get to come away from poverty after the exposure and the poor do not, but this is an odd reason to not do it at all—to keep the divide and to let it grow.

*Isn't this a highly “extractive” exercise? The poor hosts give their time and good will; the poverty professionals get another notch for their careers. The response is once again that those careers would go on with or without the exposure/immersion (as most poverty careers now do). The hope is that the personal and professional impact will be beneficial to the poor as the professionals go about their “normal” work of analysis, formulation and implementation of interventions.

*Wouldn't the resources used for the exposure—for example to fly the professionals to the site of the exposure, be better used in helping the poor directly? Well, yes, but the real issue is perhaps the tradeoff in using resources in this way versus using them for the next report for the shelf.

There is by now a fair amount written on immersions, synthesizing lessons from a range of experiences, and putting them in the context of a broader strategy of learning in development organizations.⁸ But it is still a minority activity. How many poverty professionals can say that they have done such an exercise in the past 18 months? A fitting tribute to Robert's legacy would be the regularization of immersions/exposures as a normal part of the poverty professional's career.

⁸ See for example, Osner (2004), Eyben (2004), SEWA (2006), Chambers (2006), Action Aid (2010), Exposure and Dialogue Programme (2010).

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