

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Easterly: Development economists are cozy with autocratic leaders, little help gets to poor

For the past seven weeks, we have used this column to examine four different reports that, in light of global climate change, looked at potential challenges in food production, particularly in developing countries. Most of the discussion concerning increased food production in developing countries has looked at the technological changes that could provide farmers with the tools they will need to adapt to a changing climate.

This week's discussion takes a different turn. In a talk that he gave to the World Affairs Council of Northern California (<http://tinyurl.com/o48mpl2>), William Easterly discussed his new book, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, in which he moves away from technical fixes and argues that economic and political rights are crucial to the development process. Easterly is Professor of Economics and Co-director, Development Research Institute, New York University. He has spent 30 years as a development economist, 16 years of those the World Bank. Easterly has also written *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics and The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*.

In his talk, he says, "it saddens me that... too often we development economists, those of us who fight the global war on poverty, have been on the wrong side, that we have been too often on the side of the autocrats and not on the side of those who are fighting for their freedom." He then goes on to explain how—from his perspective—that has occurred. According to Easterly, many well-intentioned people have bought into three basic simple myths.

The first myth is the belief in the technocratic solution (experts have the answers) to poverty—spraying chemicals for malaria, providing pills for vitamin deficiency, building terraces to prevent soil erosion, drilling bore holes to provide water. The belief was that this would end poverty. It didn't.

The technocratic solution to poverty and underdevelopment "fails to ask two very important questions:" 1) who is going to provide these technocratic solutions? And, 2) "why didn't they do them already?"

Easterly says, "the answer to the first question... is usually some combination of development experts like me advising local governments in poor countries who are usually autocratic. So our basic model is wise experts from the West advising autocrats in the Rest." With regard to the second question it must be remembered that autocrats have little motivation to solve

these problems; they don't have to face real elections.

He went on to give the example of Meles Zenawi (an autocrat from the Rest) the former ruler of Ethiopia (1991 to his death in 2012) who has been given significant resources for development by international NGOs and countries like the US. Despite his dictatorial behavior he was praised for his work by USAID and World Bank officials (experts from the West) with whom he worked.

And so if the experts and the autocrats worked together, why did this not solve the problem of poverty? Easterly points out that Ethiopia has a long history of autocratic rulers which includes Menelik II, Haile Selassie, and Mengistu Haile Mariam, before Zenawi overthrew Mengistu in 1991. Ethiopia's long history of autocracy is not the solution to its poverty, Easterly says, rather it is the cause.

When human rights observers pointed out that Zenawi withheld aid financed famine relief to anyone who was not a member of his party, nothing was done by donor nations and groups. Instead they talked about his importance in the war on terror.

The solution, Easterly argues, is individual rights. Political scientists and economists have long known that individual rights can cause positive outcomes. Governments only behave when we make them behave through elections. And responsive governments protect economic rights so that private sectors entrepreneurs can provide the technical fixes. And as we have seen technical fixes do happen.

So why didn't we adopt a strategy of the promotion of individual political and economic rights? We forgot that there were a set of countries that had already developed—Japan, Western Europe, and North America. The decision was made to exclude those who had already developed as models for developing countries in the post-WWII era. We could not imagine that the solutions that worked for us would also work for poor people of another race.

And so we developed the technocratic solution, forgetting that the technocratic solution had driven the colonial empires. "The colonialists were so racist that they could not imagine that the solutions that worked for us rich people would also work for poor people. They couldn't imagine that poor people were just like us, except without money."

Easterly continues, "it wasn't the shortage of technical solutions that was causing poverty because we already knew them 70 years ago. It was the technocratic autocratic power of the colonialists that did

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Cont. from p. 1

not actually have the incentives to make these things work.” The colonialists argued that they first had to solve the problem of poverty before they could give the colonial population political rights—an argument for continued domination. When in reality, it is not possible to solve the problem of poverty without economic and political rights.

When the transfer of power did take place, what often happened was the trading in of colonial autocrats for indigenous autocrats who acted just like their predecessors. And so instead of the divine right of kings it becomes “the development rights of dictators.” It is “frankly easier to assume that the government you are working with is good and it simplifies our problems as development experts to just hand them a list of technical solutions.” But we have to recognize that we do not have all the answers for poor people.

According to Easterly, “there is one last myth that makes people believe in benevolent autocrats.... And I’ll summarize the evidence for benevolent autocrats that is a part of this myth in one word: China.... China is an authoritarian country and its had remarkable economic growth.” In this vein, he also mentions South Korea. This is one of the strongest reasons that people believe in benevolent autocrats.”

But if “a high level of political and economic rights results in a high level of prosperity,” then a little change in political freedom and a lot of economic freedom also results in positive results. And that is what has happened. Beginning at an abysmally low level, both countries have made dramatic improvements. And in Korea economic freedom was followed by political freedom and democratic change. “Poverty is not caused by a shortage of experts; it is caused by a shortage of rights,” Easterly said.

Easterly argues that the principles of development

have been wrong. “It’s a myth that the technocratic solution is a solution. It’s a myth that the blank slate is blank. It’s a myth that benevolent autocrats are benevolent.”

“If the ideas are wrong, we have now a battle of ideas. He then quotes John Maynard Keynes who said, “The ideas of economists...both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men...are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.”

“If you don’t agree with the ideas that I have stated...that’s fine. You can join the debate on the other side. The important thing is just that we have a debate.” To date there have been no discussions. The World Bank President has never used the word democracy. Easterly then quotes an Ethiopian blogger, Eskender Nega, who was sentenced by Meles Zeenawi to 18 years in jail for speaking out, ““Democracy should no longer be seen as the esoteric virtue of Westerners, but the ubiquitous expression of our common humanity. Tyranny is increasingly unsustainable; it is doomed to failure.””

As we wrestle with the questions of climate change, the future of agricultural production, and how to feed the world in 2050 and beyond, it is critical that we engage in a vigorous, broader discussion about effective international development.

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