There is a growing trend in current transatlantic (by which I mean British and American) development research and debate to admit the hubris of the development endeavour to date. Since around the turn of the century, researchers associated with major donor organisations finally began listening to what their supposed “beneficiaries” had been saying for decades i.e. you don’t know all the answers, development is more complex than your blueprints for progress imply, please listen more.

Although they have different backgrounds, Bill Easterly and Ben Ramalingam have both published books which can be located in this welcome tendency. Bill Easterly is the better known of the writers, having made his name criticising the aid project, fairly convincingly in my view. In “The Tyranny of Experts” he takes his aversion to the “planners” to a new level. Technocrats who think they have all the answers are, for Easterly, the main root of the problem.

Easterly’s argument, backed up in his own admission as much by anecdote as evidence, is that centrally planned development programs are less likely to lead to actual development progress than efforts to increase individual liberty. Actually he thinks they will lead to the opposite – heavy-handed and often violent repression of progressive instincts.

The best parts of the book are profound and convincing. He reminds us that “development” emerged as a concept at a time, in the first half of the 20th century, when racism was the norm in Washington and London. The idea that “we know what is best for them” was simply a given and although racism is less acceptable today, the arrogance of development experts turning up with answers to which locals should adhere is, unfortunately, still fairly common practice.

Meanwhile, Easterly’s analysis and vindication of Hayek and Smith as the messiahs of free thinking is thoroughly readable – this reviewer at least was left with a much enriched impression of both. Building on history as much as economic theory, Easterly shows how innovation occurs, and why it is the cornerstone of development progress. Foster innovation and freedom of spirit, he argues, and you will give development its best shot. He is, provocatively, in favour of the world’s currently massive population because the more people there are the more innovation there is likely to be.

Most powerfully, perhaps, he questions the very idea that certain policies or politicians (he has a particular aversion to autocrats, quite understandably) are responsible for economic growth, a phenomenon he insists no-one really understands and which tends to return to mean over time, regardless of development plans and strategies. And he argues that given this uncertainty, the burden of proof should be on those who would undermine individual rights in the name of development, an attitude he takes as oxymoronic.

This is the most powerful argument in his book, both logically and morally, but it is also where his argument begins to overreach itself. In criticising the World Bank in particular for the development policies it foisted on unsuspecting countries (or more accurately, complicit national leaders), he criticises not the content of those plans, but the very idea of having a plan at all. While he doesn’t mention him by name, you know he has his nemesis Jeffrey Sachs in mind as he criticises the Gates Foundation and other mega international efforts to improve health and reduce poverty.

His argument departs not only from logic (if a plan doesn’t work, it doesn’t follow that you shouldn’t have a plan, but that you should have a different one), but also from the evidence. Some of the greatest gains in international poverty reduction have taken place in the last 15 years, a period characterised perhaps more than any other in history by global partnerships for change, supported by all sectors of society. We are asked to believe that this is a coincidence, or indeed that progress has occurred in spite of, rather than because of, such efforts.

In fact, in one rather surprising passage, he questions whether the remarkable progress on child mortality most people believe has taken place in Ethiopia in the last couple of decades really has taken place. It seems too complex a proposition for Easterly that under a particular autocrat, in this case Meles Zenawi, a country can experience both progress and violence at one and the same time. But this is the nature of almost all development stories, anywhere in the world, and one of the reasons why it is so hard to posit a coherent theory of “development”. Easterly, like many academics, prefers to fit evidence into his grand theme rather than just accept that life is complicated. Ironically, while preaching humility in what we claim know about development, in the end he himself is guilty of over-claiming.

Ben Ramalingam does not make that mistake in “Aid on the edge of chaos”. He is a leading proponent of the growing movement to acknowledge the complexity of development, both at the macro level, which is where Easterly mainly operates, and at the project level, which is Ramalingam’s central focus.

Ramalingam’s thesis is altogether more successfully conveyed, in part because its scope is smaller, and in part because he hammers the point home in an organised and relentless assault of anecdote and information. His book is in three parts. First, he analyses “the way aid works” drawing on by now fairly well-established analyses and critiques. In part two he introduces complexity theory in an erudite, fascinating, but pretty long-winded, manner. Ramalingam has a tendency to use three examples where one will do – if the book had been half as long it might have been twice as good. I went away totally convinced by the relevance and power of complexity theory, but also somewhat overwhelmed.

It is in part three that Ramalingam links aid and complexity, setting out a vision for “the way aid could work”. He argues for more learning, adapting, listening and networks. Replete with encouraging examples of what has worked in aid, his fundamental argument is that aid should, in his words “shift from ‘external push’ – filling gaps in a predictable and linear fashion – to ‘internal catalyst’. Catalytic aid would not create development, but it would identify, expand and sustain the space for change” in the face of complex realities. It is a powerful message.

While I welcome the content of Ramalingam’s book, I am less enamoured with the way it is presented as new and revealing; a cover-reviewer claims the book “catapults development thinking into the 21st century”. What Ramalingam does do is offer impressive academic depth to back up what is actually a well-known and, dare I say, obvious proposition i.e. that success in development cooperation is a much more complex issue than many so-called development experts have previously thought, and that it defies simple pre-cooked approaches. In that sense he does what Matt Andrews and his colleagues have done for another equally obvious and related idea i.e. that when you bring blueprint answers to institutional reform you are unlikely to succeed (Matt Andrews (2014). Ramalingam refers to Andrews’ Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation approach, which the layman might know better simply as “learning by doing”, hardly a new idea, as Andrews acknowledges, but one that has benefited from being thought through by social scientists and is still certainly worthy of ramming home at the major development agencies.

But these ideas have been around for many decades. Ramalingam mentions Kenneth Arrow a couple of times, but Easterly offers the best quote: “The notion that through the workings of an entire system effects may be very different from, or even opposed to, intentions is surely the most important intellectual contribution that economic thought has made to the general understanding of social processes” (Arrow, 1983, quoted in Easterly). This central insight about the importance of iteration over blueprints, while couched in the language of the new science of complexity, is the common insight of many of the recipients of aid over the last fifty years, and this could have been better acknowledged by Ramalingam.

# The major flaw with both Easterly’s and Ramalingam’s books is their integration of politics and power. While both certainly discuss politics, for both development failure is a problem that can be overcome by arriving at the right technical solution by a process of innovation (Easterly) or iteration (Ramalingam). But the major cause of stagnation and development failure is not poor technique but questions of power – powerful and wealthy parts of society (sometimes known as “elites” – see for instance Tim Kelsall’s work as part of the Africa Power and Politics programme (e.g. Business, Politics, and the State in Africa, 2013) or, very different, Eduardo Galeano’s classic elaboration of dependency theory in Open Veins of Latin America (1971) simply do not wish to trade their advantages for greater equality of opportunity, however much iterative problem solving, creativity and innovation is encouraged. This is as true in rich countries as poor. Has the US health system failed to reform because of a failure to learn iteratively? Or does it have more to do with vested interests?

The task of those interested in ending poverty and a fairer world is not only to develop better technical solutions, but to build the power of the poorest to take on those that keep them poor. Neither Easterly nor Ramalingam appear to get this. Easterly, for instance, carries out quite a thorough analysis of why Colombia has been so slow to develop despite its apparently strong credentials, but he can’t seriously think that a less planned and more innovative society would have had much effect against the extreme power and wealth inequalities that he himself acknowledges and are at the heart of so many unfulfilled promises of change. And it is striking that he chooses not to mention Cuba, an example if any exists that autocratic politics can indeed lead to better health and education outcomes for poorer people.

In an article I wrote on a few years back on how to approach development in the modern world, I called for “radical humility in the face of complexity” (2009), so I can only welcome the current trend in development writing which demonstrates a new-found humility among northern thinkers and practitioners, perhaps inspired partly by the current economic and political problems facing many northern countries. Whereas Dambisa Moyo (2009) claimed to “know what is necessary” and was simply frustrated at the inability of bureaucrats and politicians to implement stock policies, Easterly and Ramalingam insist on more circumspection in development advice and practice. This call needs to reach right down to small western NGOs and right up to the World Bank, which. Recognising development processes as complex and requiring careful listening and iteration, is the first step towards making progress for the communities intended to benefit (as brilliantly set out in a very different way by Anderson et al, 2012), and it needs to reach all those who still prefer rigid logframes over planning, and who still monitor only a proportion of their copious and complex impacts. Easterly and Ramalingam contribute significantly to this task.

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