Paolo Dieci

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT.
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ADDRESSED TO
DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS ARISING FROM THE
READING OF "THE TYRANNY OF
EXPERTS" OF WILLIAM EASTERLY

25 agosto 2015

Planning and Development. Some considerations addressed to development practitioners arising from the reading of "The Tyranny of Experts"[i] of William Easterly

Forward

The 2015 is the year of the agendas. It ends the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)[ii] plan and it is inaugurated the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) plan[iii]. Therefore, a new agenda, a new updated plan.

In the year 2000, when the UN launched the MDGs, thousands of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), governmental institutions, agencies, development practitioners, scholars welcomed it as a great new: for the first time different efforts and interventions were going to be framed under a comprehensive and potentially assessable unified strategy. Now it is time to conduct such an assessment and to ascertain how far the world has gone towards the path leading to half absolute poverty, reduce child mortality, and so on, referring to the eight MDGs. The new agenda is much more ambitious than the MDGs, as the SDGs are seventeen, with an average of 10 targets per each goal.

This is in a few words the current situation. The scope of the following considerations and reflections is not to criticise the old and the new agendas, but to share some concerns and thoughts originated by years of field work and the reading of the book of William Easterly.

I believe that a number of arguments of The Tyranny of Experts deserve our attention. I try to summarise three of them. It is an uneasy exercise, as the book is enriched with a huge variety of historical and geographical data and analysis.

There are some "cross-cutting" ideas of Easterly which are worth mentioning at the beginning of the analysis. I try to interpret and summarise them as follows: development is the result of historical dynamics that are hardly plannable; the concept of "agenda" has in itself some limitations and the floor should be given to the poor, providing them, rather than with an agenda, with the opportunity to choose what is best for them; the Tyranny of Experts could be also expressed as the expertise of the tyrannical persons and we, as planners, aid givers, agencies, risk to behave often as tyrannical persons, since we do pretend poor people to follow our pre-defined plans; freedom and individual rights are not only inspirable ends in themselves as they are also pre-conditions for sustainable and effective social and economic improvements.

Three arguments of The Tyranny of Experts deserving attention and consideration (among many others)

We pay the cost of a debate which did not happen and it is not happening between planning and freedom

This is the entry point of the book, which refers to the two economists who received the Nobel prize in the same year (1974): Friedrich Hayek and Gunnar Myrdal.

Hayek had advocated for individual rights and freedoms as the only suitable conditions for prosperity and development, while Myrdal had theorised that in extreme backword realities, people would have been directed towards the achievement of common goals, even at the price of an authoritarian policy.

None of them could be labelled as a conservative merely relying on market's dynamics or a not democratic person advocating for dictatorial systems. They just had two different views about development.

Without here reporting the rich analysis elaborated by Easterly, I go straight to the point: development agendas have been much more fed by Myrdal than by Hayek. Many scholars with a strong democratic background have theorised the legitimacy of the action of benevolent autocrats in the Rest (the expression is taken by Easterly and indicates the "not western world"). Some limitations to freedom and individual rights, that would not have been tolerated in "our world" have been considered as unavoidable prices to be paid to the development of the Rest.

Why a real debate – within the UN system, the World Bank, the aid agencies – addressed at least to merge the two approaches did not and does not happen? Easterly provides the reader with a number of answers to this question. I will concentrate only on one of them: the misperception of underdevelopment as a merely technical problem.

Technicalities and policies: development is always about choices

The more misleading "ideology" of development agencies has been – and it is – to consider development and underdevelopment as merely technical issues. If underdevelopment is a technical problem, development will be the result of good technicalities. If someone – for whatever reasons – is hampering or delaying the implementation of these technicalities, he/she becomes an obstacle to be removed.

This idea, says Easterly, is wrong. Development, far from being a purely technical solution to a number of problems (such as high child mortality, low literacy rate, low per capita income, hunger, etc.), is the result of social, cultural, economic, political dynamics and processes that need to be viewed in an historical perspective. People may have different views *vis a vis* hierarchically defined plans but this does not mean that they should be seen as enemies of the progress. It is worth here to summarise what Easterly writes about Colombia, as it make easier to understand his thought about the limitations of the planning approach.

One chapter of the Tyranny of Experts is titled "one day in Bogotá", the day being April 9, 1948, when three things happened in the capital city of Colombia: the mission of the World Bank (at that time the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) President McCloy to plan and agree with the Colombian President Ospina the deployment of a team of experts to find solutions to the many problems of the country; the assassination of Jorge Gaitán, a Colombian pro poor activist who was expected to win the next electoral elections for the Liberal Party and; the visit of the US Secretary of State, Marshall, seeking supports and alliances from the American states in the newly born cold war.

Three events apparently untied but at the end unified by a common thread: freedom, rights, democracy were not at the hearth of the international agenda. The assassination of Gaitán did not prevent the Bank from sending its mission of experts, whose report was finally published on August 1950, providing the government of Colombia with a number of instructions and recommendations of technical nature, in areas like agriculture, infrastructure, education, nutrition and others.

For the sake of our analysis, let's not consider now the third event: the Marshall visit to reinforce an anti communism alliance. Many other examples could be done showing how

during the cold war the West has sacrificed its "own values" in order to strengthen its weight in the bipolar world. Extending this analysis we could also consider the reality of today, when similar approaches are found in the search for partners in the fight against fundamentalism. But this is another story.

It is more interesting here to underline another point. The international "experts" were probably genuinely convinced that their technical plan was the right and unique possible solution to the problems of Colombia and therefore it had to be applied. Debates over it, exchanges of views among Colombian citizens and organizations, free discussion over the plan would have resulted in an undesirable waste of time.

All the Colombian citizens and those knowing the story of this country can witness that things did not go ahead as the experts planned. The period between 1948 and 1956 is called *La Violencia*, with around 400,000 Colombian killed in armed conflicts between liberal and conservative supporters. The plan remained largely not implemented and the country entered in a phase of instability with an increased number of poor and one of the highest inequality index in the world. Last but not least the lack of democratic opportunities went to feed for many years armed conflicts, that resulted also in areas of the country outside the state's control.

Development: some lessons from history

The third argument here underlined is about the link between history and development. Easterly thinks that development agencies have been inspired by a dirigist approach, according to which conscious design (planning) is the key and only means to achieve better societies. Contrary to this approach, is the spontaneous solutions one. What does Easterly mean for spontaneous solutions? This point deserves attention because we may agree or disagree with the concept but we should try to avoid misperceptions and oversimplifications. Easterly does not advocate for a *laissez faire* system where solutions are left entirely in the hands of market and competition. To express his view the author refers to a speech delivered in 2013 by a development veteran named Owen Barder. According to Barder development is an "emergent property of a complex adaptive system". That is to say: what matters is to have a social and political system where feedbacks can be generated and solutions can be found.

This system requires rules, institutions, good governance. The debate between conscious design and spontaneous solutions is not the same as between "left" and "right". It is about a different vision of the link between development and history. According to the spontaneous solutions approach history teaches us that development, far from being the outcome of planning, is the outcome of social dynamics in well organized societies, with an high degree of freedom and rights. Nobody had planned, says Easterly, the tremendous development of internet. It was made possible by an enabling environment where market, research, innovation have been regulated and left free.

Another misperception feeding development agencies leads to perceive all poor countries as "blank states". A Blank State is an empty political and social space where experts can suggest solutions and policies from scratch without considering the history and peculiarities of any given society. That's, according to Easterly, the "philosophy" of the "best practice". One solution that was successful in one African country can be replicated to a country in Latin America, with the two countries having in common only a level of poverty higher than the one existing in the west.

Finally, aid agencies seem to care much more – if not exclusively – about national development than about individuals wellbeing. If we go to have a look to "our history", do we perceive that the achievement of a certain (imperfect of course) wellbeing has been the result of the benevolent attitude of national governments or, rather, of increasing power and wealth of individuals and communities? I add here one personal comment. This vision does not necessarily meet the liberalist approach; even in a totally different conceptual framework, such as that traditionally belonging to the left, the welfare and the progress of certain unprivileged groups is seen as the result of their increased power, hegemony and struggle, rather than as the outcome of good decisions taken by the state.

Through deep historical analysis Easterly comes to a conclusion: societies that have been experimenting for a longer time respect for individual rights and opportunities have reached more sustainable development than societies having been deprived of rights and freedoms. This is assessable also analysing inequalities and wealth rankings among areas and regions within the same states. Here Easterly makes a number of concrete examples, from Africa (comparing for instance regions of Ghana oppressed by slaves trade with others that have not been impacted by this tragedy) to Europe (in this case an interesting analysis is done about Italy, where, before the creation of a unified state in the second half of the nineteen century, in some central northern areas a tradition of citizenship's rights led to more prosperous environments than in the south where for centuries autocratic rule had been imposed).

And so? What could be done?

Thirty years of field work and hundreds of meetings with persons and communities in various corners of the world give me the perception that many of the arguments of The Tyranny of Experts make a lot of sense. I still believe that aid can make the difference in the life of the people, as it does, when it is properly and reliably planned and delivered. I also believe that what can actually make the difference is the level of relevance of the aid. How does a given project really fit with the perceived and actual needs of the people? Are we, as development practitioners, able to listen to the poor and wiling to be led by their views? When the answer is yes, we may be of some help, otherwise, as tens of years of development cooperation show, even assessable results achieved during the life of the project tend to vanish soon after the project is over. We were just applying our plan.

As development practitioners we are not, in the strict sense of the word, policy makers. We can dialogue with the policy makers and the first point to stress is that democracy and freedom should be always put at the hearth of any policy dialogue initiative. Easterly is right: freedom and rights are not only ends in themselves (as they are), they are also pre-conditions for durable progresses. The fight against poverty is primarily a search for individual and societal rights. Rights means also access to resources, opportunity to influence policy choices, freedom of association, respect for minorities.

We need to feed our action with good ideas and empirical researches and we have to avoid the mistake of labelling these ideas in an oversimplified way. Advocating for more individual rights and less planned development has not in itself any specific ideological connotation. We may have our different visions and ideologies but at the same time agree with some key facts and concepts: history is hardly plannable, development is not just the results of good recipes, freedom and rights are pre-conditions for sustainable progress. There is nothing ideologically inspired in these ideas.

All development agencies well know that some planning exercise is needed. Whenever we start a project we have to pre-determine the results to be achieved, the means of implementation, the duration, the beneficiaries. That is to say, in a few words, we need a plan. Having a plan does not mean in itself endorsing a dirigist approach. Nevertheless, inspired by the Tyranny of Experts, there are two issues to be considered.

The first issue is: how did we elaborate our plan? Is the plan merely the translation of internationally elaborated targets after proposed (when not imposed) as the "only right things to do" to the people? Or the plan has significantly been fed by feedbacks and suggestions arising from the people themselves? Is it not a new theme, as development practitioners have debated for years about people's participation and local ownership, but I believe that, although not new, the theme is still topical.

Finally, the last issue, which I try to summarise in this way: of course we have to predefine our targets, associating them with concrete and attainable indicators of achievement. We cannot simply say "we want less child morbidity" without detailing some percentages (where we are and where we seek to arrive), indicating the morbidities to be reduced and how the expected results will be achieved. Said this, we should also concentrate on the long term impact of our job, supporting the reinforcement of an effective enabling environment. If history is hardly plannable and shows us that durable progresses are more likely to happen in societies open to the rights and democracy, *vis a vis* authoritarian ones, a good question we should always pose to ourselves is: are we contributing or not, with our project, to give the floor to the poor? Is our project a purely hierarchical or a really democratic space?

At least in the field, through our projects, can we finally conduct the debate that has never been done between planning and freedom? I hope we'll be able to give a positive answer to this question.

---

[i] William Easterly, The Tyranny of Experts, Basic Books, New York, 2013
[ii] The eight MDGs are: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability, to develop a global partnership for development
[iii] The seventeen SDGs that will be endorsed in September by the United Nations are: End poverty in all its forms everywhere, End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture, Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages, Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation, Reduce inequality within and among countries, Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss, Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development