



**‘Voices of the Poor’ and Beyond:
Lessons from the Past,
Agenda for the Future**

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Introduction to Robert Chambers by Des Gasper, Professor of Human Development, Development Ethics and Public Policy at the International Institute of Social Studies.

Robert Chambers

Robert Chambers has been one of the most influential scholars and writers in international development studies since the 1980s. For the last 40 years he has been a researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, based at the University of Sussex in England. He became a leading figure in the field of development management already in the 1970s, publishing several books on the management of land settlement schemes and much work on rural development management more broadly. This body of work drew on his earlier decade as an administrator, lecturer and researcher in East Africa, and an eventual total of twelve or thirteen years of experience living in Africa, to which he later added six years of research in South Asia. From quite early in his career, Dr. Chambers showed a special talent for expressing insights in simple terms that could reach wide audiences - for example in underlining to researchers and planners the relevance of seasonality for all aspects of rural living, and in warnings about the low relevance of super-sophisticated methods of planning and assessment which are used after the real political decisions about proposed investments have in fact been made. He suggested in contrast that for assessment methods, in a well-known phrase, often 'simple is optimal', when this means posing and addressing basic questions at a time when the answers can still make a policy difference. Similarly, he stressed the importance of identifying and using suitable and multiple methods of 'rapid appraisal' rather than relying overwhelmingly on surveys ('survey slavery') or traditional anthropological fieldwork, both of which could generate findings years later than required and yet be subject to serious biases, or on the 'development tourism' of quick visits to easily accessible locations at favourable times of year, prone to even larger biases.

What has made Robert Chambers famous, however, has been his work from the early 1980s onwards. He has led innovation in several areas of major importance, work which has had widespread and lasting impact on fellow-researchers, on practitioners, policy-makers and development agencies, and in teaching and training. His contributions have been recognised by three previous honorary doctorates (from the Universities of Sussex, Edinburgh, and East Anglia).



Robert Chambers - Cambodia

Looking back on the work of his mainstream development management period, Chambers came to consider it much of it to be misleading and misconceived, sometimes even disastrous. He has made a major contribution to a paradigm shift in development studies and practice towards more 'people-centered' and bottom-up approaches. From being a mainstream development management scholar, he evolved into being a world leader of participatory development research and participatory practice, and a central figure in the corresponding global knowledge networks and 'communities of practice', not only in universities but also amongst professionals and other practitioners in NGOs, governments and civil society. He helped to identify, highlight and name many potential biases in the observation and understanding of poor people's lives; to diagnose the sources of these biases, in methods of observation and analysis and in the underlying power-relations and mindsets; and to build a repertoire of new methods, and a system of ideas to sustain them. The 'rapid appraisal' perspective became complemented by 'relaxed appraisal' and, vitally, by 'participatory appraisal'; and toolboxes of useful methods - such as 'participatory mapping' - were developed, tested, adapted and widely adopted. This research programme was reported on in books like *Farmer First - farmer innovation and agricultural research* (1989) and *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997). Not least amongst the methods he has helped to foster, he is known worldwide as a leader of workshops; some of his insights here are presented in a 2002 book entitled *Participatory Workshops*. Over recent years, Chambers has promoted sustained experimentation with and advocacy of quantitative participatory approaches and participatory research with large groups. He has also systematically connected such work on research methods to a broader agenda of 'Participatory Learning and Action'.

The methodological reorientations have been used to build modified approaches to understanding and influencing poverty and livelihoods. The work on biases and blind-spots in conventional poverty research and on constructing workable alternative methods of investigation supported emergence on a large scale of 'livelihoods analysis' and a 'sustainable livelihoods perspective', that examine the vulnerability, assets, coping behaviours and resilience of poor people, with close attention to the themes of uncertainty, complexity and diversity. In this research Chambers has again played a leading role.

Chambers' work concerns better connection of development researchers to the lives of the poor, and also a reorientation of the work and outlook of development practitioners. In better connecting academic development research with practitioner realities, he has helped at the same time in reorientation and upgrading of the enormously expanded volume of development analysis done by practitioners in national and international development agencies, NGOs, civil society and advocacy organizations. Partnering his analytical, methodological and policy studies have been reflections on the fundamental perceptions, options, roles and responsibilities of development researchers and practitioners; for example in the books *Challenging the Professions* (1993), and especially *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997). Chambers has explored the meanings and values of professionalism, the prevalent epistemological assumptions and biases, and the nature of processes of personal change and of taking responsibility for one's own actions and one's impact on others. With others he has promoted and also studied the practice of 'immersion visits' for development bureaucrats, not least in the World Bank. Having supported the World Bank's huge *Voices of the Poor* research project, Chambers and others pushed this largest and predominant international development organization, which sees itself as definer of best practice, to become more willing and able to listen. He helped to promote immersion visits for senior World Bank bureaucrats, to bring them face-to-face with ordinary people and so to clarify, test and reconsider their own assumptions. His work on personal and organizational change has been grounded in cool-headed organizational ethnography, as in famous papers on 'The self-deceiving state' (1992) and 'All power deceives' (1994) and writings on the gestation and life-cycles of innovations and the dangers of deifying successful innovators.

Dr. Chambers has developed these methods and perspectives through close examination of a series of economic and social sectors and issues: including land settlement schemes, water management, especially for canal irrigation, trees and forestry, and nutrition and sanitation (e.g. in the books *Managing Canal Irrigation*, 1988, and *To the Hands of the Poor - Water and Trees*, 1989) and on specific themes such as the importance of seasonality (as in *Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty*, 1981). He describes his style as opportunistic nomadism - wandering into new intellectual and professional areas in search of green pastures, bringing a questioning iconoclastic eye to examine orthodoxies and to generate new ideas, and then moving on when the insights have been routinized.

Overall, he has contributed in convincing many development researchers and practitioners to take a more people-centred view. And flowing out of and partnering that view, he has helped to inspire and coordinate large networks of researchers and researcher-practitioners in the formulating, testing and sharing of new sets of methods, methods that are open to ordinary people's knowledge and involvement, and in then using such methods to explore many aspects of people's livelihoods and of change processes and approaches to planned change. His participatory research methods have 'broken the fixed mindset that poor

people cannot contribute knowledge and understanding of their own situation', to quote Richard Longhurst's report on a workshop to mark the appearance of a festschrift volume in 2011, the second in Chambers' honour. In the judgement of many he can thus be called (adapting the title of that festschrift) a leader in revolutionizing development thinking. Robert Chambers himself remarks that much of what is attributed to him is mis-attributed: very often his contribution was to bring together and articulate insights from other people – but he has done this work of synthesis and articulation in a particularly effective way, that has been sustained over several decades and has strongly stimulated the work of others.

A prolific writer, he has had the skills to convert his papers and journal articles into many books, that have been accessible in both style and price to very wide audiences, and so to become possibly the best known figure around the world regarding participatory research and action. This began with the book *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, published in 1983, which went through 14 printings in its English edition and was translated into numerous other languages; and it continues through to his 16th book, published in 2012, called *Provocations for Development*. By that title he means both that he aims to disturb some conventional development ideas and practices, and also that he puts forward his own ideas to be tested and improved. Chambers has practiced what he preaches: being open to diverse ideas and experiences, listening, accepting criticism, changing his mind and updating. He is exceptional in not only the extent and quality of his influence, but in how sustained this has been ever since the 1983 book. Through remaining strongly self-critical and continually informed and disciplined by global communities of practice—networks of researchers, practitioners and activists—he has remained prominent not just as a 'past master' but as a continuing innovator. His recent books (*Ideas for Development* (2005) and *Revolutions in Development Inquiry* (2008)) are notable for how they explicitly revisit, review, critique and revise his earlier work. Overall his career is marked by a spirit of innovation, commitment and collaboration, listening and self-criticism, leading to further innovation.

The impressive corpus of Chambers' work, its orientation and relevance to the global poor, and its successful spanning of the boundaries between research, policy, practice, and daily human experience, amply justify this award of an honorary doctorate.



Robert Chambers - 60th Dies Natalis ISS, 11 October 2012

'Voices of the Poor' and Beyond: Lessons from the Past, Agenda for the Future¹

It is a great honour to have been invited to deliver this lecture. I am moved, and also a bit ashamed to discover how much it means to me, to have been recognised by ISS and the University of Rotterdam, and that too as part of the celebrations of such significant anniversary occasions - the 60th for ISS and the 100th next year for the University. There is added significance because ISS is the elder sister by 14 years of IDS where I am based, and probably the oldest of all the organizations in EADI whose Directors are here today for their annual meeting. Indeed, ISS may have seeded the idea of IDS in its founders. All this is compounded for me because for much of my life I have been something of an outsider. It also encourages me and gives me energy to keep going and not retire quite yet. So, a big thank you to all those concerned.

I have been asked to reflect on the 'Voices of the Poor', initially known as Consultations with the Poor, the project which in 1999 and 2000 sought the views of people living in poverty. This was timed and designed to feed into and influence the World Development Report 2000, *Attacking Poverty* (World Bank, 2000). Revisiting the Consultations is timely and relevant for today's challenges in development, not least because of the debates and discussions going on about what should succeed the MDGs after 2015. I shall describe the setting, process, experience, learning, and impact of the Consultations project, followed by critical reflections. These I shall set in our contemporary context, leading to an agenda for today and the future. Please bear in mind that I have often been wrong in the past and will surely be wrong in some of the things I say today.

The 1990s, leading up to the Consultations

The 1990s were a heyday of participation. There was an explosion of innovation with the discovery that almost all people were far more capable of appraisal, diagramming and analysis than professionals had supposed. Following the first one in Ghana in 1993, there was a steady and then exponential spread of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs -Holland with Blackburn, 1997; Norton *et al* ,2001; Robb, 2002). There was a Participation Learning Group in the World Bank with senior support including that of Wolfensohn. Ravi Kanbur, the appointed Task Manager for the World Development Report 2000(WDR) on Poverty and Development, undertook wide consultations in all continents, and himself went on an immersion in India.

¹ This is not a transcript but written up ten days later from the notes for the lecture and my memory. There is no major new material but this cannot pretend to be exactly what I said. Ideas evolve!

To influence and feed into the WDR, the World Bank proposed a project to consult poor people - the Consultations with the Poor - on a wide scale. IDS was approached to partner the Bank team, and after much agonising and debate ,(Were we being coopted? Was this exercise merely cosmetic? Would it really have a good net impact?) decided to engage with the process of developing the methodology and with the analysis and writing up, in which I was involved.

The Consultations with the Poor aka Voices of the Poor

Collaboration with the Bank was fraught. There were plenty of errors on my side. I am not an easy person to collaborate with. For thirty years I have tried to persuade Jenny, my wife, who is the source of many of the ideas I write about, to collaborate on a book but she says she has seen what a disaster my collaborations have been and she does not want to destroy what remains of our beautiful relationship. I have to pay tribute to Deepa Narayan and the World Bank team for extraordinary energy and effectiveness in making the project happen at all. In parallel with the Consultations, Deepa and a team of research assistants analysed 81 PPAs leading to *Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan *et al* ,2000a). For the Consultations proper, I was in favour of only 5 countries, then 12, and we ended up with 23. The methodology guide, in drawing up which Meera Kaul Shah played a major part, remains a remarkable document. Meera in addition played an absolutely critical role in training many of the national teams. The timetable was terribly tight. We ended up with over 2,000 focus groups which typically met several times in some 270 communities in the 23 countries.

Four topics were explored:

1. People's own words and concepts of wellbeing and illbeing
2. People's priorities
3. People's experiences of institutions and attitudes towards them
4. Gender relations

and in each case how these and realities had changed over the past 10 years or so. Visual participatory methods, including wealth ranking, were piloted and widely used.

There were striking findings such as: the diversity and commonalities of people's concepts of wellbeing and illbeing, good and bad quality of life; the importance to poor people of the body (which became a whole chapter) as their main, vulnerable, uninsured asset which could flip from asset to liability - and linked with this the many problems of access to curative medicine and rude treatment by health staff; the multiple adverse effects of 'The Places of the Poor' which again became a whole chapter; the almost universal persecution and exploitation of poor people by the police; the value of faith organizations; changes in gender relations to which I shall return; pervasively, powerlessness (another chapter) and

how the many dimensions of poverty interact and interlock to keep poor people poor and make them poorer 'trapped in a many-stranded web'; theft as a survival strategy reluctantly resorted to by some who were at their wits end, with children to feed; how people who were desperate were paid less by employers because they were powerless to bargain; and the people we termed 'the bottom poor' - people identified by many focus groups as poorer even than they were - and who were sympathised with or feared and despised.

There were obvious positive impacts. The research teams were often deeply moved, and some followed up with national policy influence. For myself, and perhaps many others, my outrage and anger were renewed. Wolfensohn said he and his wife read the book twice, and he repeatedly quoted from it. The quotations of what people said did serve to bring realities alive. The book was printed in thousands of copies. The WDR had over 20 quotations of what people said, and 6 out of 91 boxes were from the Voices. But to what extent the Voices significantly changed thinking, policy or practice it is hard to say.

On the downside there were robust critics. The WDR was 'a stunning publicity stunt for the World Bank' (Cornwall and Fujita, 2007). We 'ventriloquized the poor'. 'The poor' were domesticated into a category identified and characterised as needing help. The quotations in the WDR were 'illustrations and flourishes', embellishments, disembodied voices without context. There is substance in these points.

Overall, perhaps the fairest judgement is to say that the jury is out - there will always be different views on whether we were right to engage with the Bank on this project. For myself, I think we were, on balance right, and I would do it again, but with what I have learnt and now know differently and I hope better.

Reflections

There is much to reflect on. Let me touch on a few points. Repeatedly we were faced by the need to compromise and to optimize trade-offs.

Funding and independence. At IDS we were blessed with funding from DFID which gave us a vital degree of independence. Without that, we would never have engaged. The World Bank has an unenviable record of editing, withholding and appropriating the work of its paid consultants. We were spared that. (We never had an MOU because we refused to sign a muzzling clause, and this did not make our relationship any easier). Nonetheless, editing did take place. I received back a late draft of the chapter on powerlessness from a World Bank consultant editor saying that he had removed all the 'emotional bits'. There were times when it was like death by a thousand cuts.



Robert Chambers - Nairobi

Power, naming, framing and preconceptions. As analysts and authors we had power to name and frame the realities of those who participated. I became aware of the extent to which time pressure made it harder to be open to new categories or framings. Very short of time, we opted for chapter topics from a five circle diagram I had used to describe the multidimensionality of poverty in 1983. In practical terms, it was plain impossible for these at that stage to be emergent from the data. Preconceptions could also distort. In the Bank it was believed that violence against women had increased. This was written into an important annual speech to be given by Wolfensohn. However, Meera Shah who had analysed all the site reports had found otherwise: violence against women was a severe and serious problem and in some places had increased, but overall it was reported to have decreased. In the end it was only after site reports had been analysed five times that Meera's conclusion was accepted, by which time Wolfensohn's speech was history.

Preset categories and statistics. There was much tension between the desire on the Bank side for statistics and the participatory open-endedness and emergence which others of us favoured, and which gave such rich insights, for instance into ideas of wellbeing and illbeing. In the field, research teams found the Bank's preset categories problematical - in translation, and in channeling and constraining discussion. In the middle of training, the Bank tried to introduce a questionnaire! This was successfully resisted. In the event, the preset categories did allow statistics, for instance bar charts for how people felt about different institutions (Narayan *et al*, 2000b: 201-2). Also, and without preset categories, aggregation from focus groups, as with violence against women, did prove possible (ibid.125).

The ethics of soundbites. All of us who have been editors are familiar with the power to fashion quotations through deletions so that they support an argument or our own view. With policy influence, there can be ethical dilemmas and choices, with a tension between a more complete and contextual but longer quotation, and one which is shorter and makes a point more sharply. An example was a quotation from a woman in Ethiopia (for a fuller account of the vicissitudes and misrepresentations around this quotation, see Chambers, 2003: 150-1). Part of the quotation was:

'A better life for me is to be healthy, peaceful and live in love without hunger. Love is more than any thing. Money has no value in the absence of love'.

The speech writer for Wolfensohn left out the last two sentences.

Ego. It is flattering to the ego to imagine that you are doing something important, going to important places, and meeting powerful people. I was not immune to this. I enjoyed quoting what Wolfensohn had said to us who were working on the project. He said that what we were doing was ‘..extraordinarily important to me and to the Bank...I need the voices you are unleashing....’. He was, he said, ‘looking for an army to help me. If you will become part of that army I will be delighted...I am willing to make my time available to this group...’ Such seductions are insidious, and offsetting them not always easy, even if one wants to.

Lessons and Relevance for Us Now

Do we need another Consultations or Voices project? Not, I would say, anything similar. But we do need to be in touch and up-to-date with what is happening.

First, to judge from hundreds of participants in workshops over recent years, change for poor, vulnerable and marginalised people is accelerating both in the conditions they experience and in their awareness, aspirations and priorities: the revolution of the mobile phone is but one dimension. Social change and changes in gender relations appear to be faster than ever in many contexts.

Second, there is the capital city trap, now with the tyrannising overcommunication of instant email tying officials, aid agency staff, and even NGOs more and more to capital cities. I have learnt of a social development adviser who only left the capital once in three years (though I find this difficult to believe). The economist who spent a year writing Afghanistan’s economic development plan told me he was only able to go out of Kabul once, and that was by helicopter on a private trip, a reason being that UN insurance regulations would not allow travel!

Third, there is a tension between paradigms. I use paradigm here to mean concepts and words, principles and values, methods, behaviours and relationships which are mutually reinforcing, together with personal mindsets and professional orientations. We can distinguish two paradigms: one is Newtonian or neo-Newtonian and mechanistic, concerned with things and set routines and valuing measurement, precision, predictability, rules and best practices; while the other is adaptive, pluralist and related to complexity, concerned with people and evolving processes and valuing judgment, optimal approximation, unpredictable emergence, principles, and practices that are fitting for contexts and purposes. These correspond with the left and right hemispheres of the brain, respectively. In the development there has been a sharp lurch towards the mechanistic, which can be illustrated by the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness (OECD, 2005). A sentence made up of words which occur most in the Declaration is (the numbers are the times used):

To monitor (18) indicators (30) of effective (38) performance (17) from aid (61), donors (70) and partners (96) need the capacity (20) to manage (17) the mutual (12) harmonisation (21) of programmes (22) to assess (16), measure (11) and report (11) on results (20)

A shadow sentence can be made up of words not to be found anywhere in the Declaration

To negotiate and evolve agreements that optimise outcomes for poor, vulnerable and marginalised people requires compromises and trade-offs based on personal conviction, interactions and relationships that nurture trust, and reflective appreciation of power and conflicts.

Like frogs in a heating pot, many of those involved in international development and aid have been so close to the shifts which have taken place that they are not fully aware of what has happened or its significance. But what we can recognise is a sharp shift away from the increasingly participatory ethos and practices of the 1990s to - as reflected in the words not used in the Declaration - a more mechanistic delivery theory of change and mode of aid and government practice.

These three features of our contemporary development scene - accelerating change for people living in poverty, decision makers increasingly isolated, out of touch and out of date, and the paradigm lurch towards mechanistic Newtonian practices - demand countervailing actions. Fortunately, the means are to hand. Drawing on and springing from the tradition, experience and lessons from PPAs and the Consultations there have been promising innovations. Three merit special mention:

Immersion. These entail living, eating, working and being with a family and in a community for a few days and nights (see PLA 57, 2007). These are a means for senior decision-makers and others to break out of their cocoons and gain invaluable ground-truthing personal experience, to be in touch and up to date.

The Reality Check Approach pioneered in Bangladesh with support from Sida, in which researchers stay for four to five days and nights each year at the same time of the year with the same family, immersing in their lives, and also wandering around, observing and having conversations as a friend, and with primary education and primary health (sector programmes supported by Sida) as a focus. The researchers then come together and pool experiences and a report is compiled. The first four reports (Sida, 2008-2011) have shown very rapid social change, including conditions and developments of which decision makers in Dhaka were not aware.



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Time to Listen (forthcoming). Over three years conversations about the experience of aid were held with almost 6,000 aid recipients. The findings have unquestionable authority. They are another set of 'Voices'. They throw into sharp question many of the current practices and relationships of aid. Again and again, aid recipients call for donors to 'be present' - they want and need personal contact. And most strikingly, given the cautious qualification of generalisations to which the authors (Brown and Anderson) adhere, there is this:

'Every story of effective aid told by aid recipients included a description of particular staff who worked in ways that developed respect and trust with aid recipients' (my italics)

There are quite radical, well substantiated, proposals for change. The book should, in my view, be not just on the bookshelf of all involved in aid and aid relationships, but in their minds. And the recommendations should be taken on board and implemented. The effect, were this done, could be transformative.

From Voices to Beyond 2015

There is much discussion about what should follow the MDGs when they conclude in 2015. There are numerous discussions, surveys and studies feeding into the process of puzzling what should come next. There is a High Level Panel, chaired by David Cameron, the Conservative British Prime Minister; a group of over 400 organizations working under the rubric of Beyond 2015; a UNDP initiative of capital city meetings and consultations; an initiative of Bono and others called The One; and IDS and others are engaged in a multi-method, multi-media, multi-organization initiative entitled 'Participate', designed both to feed ground truthed realities into the process and to enable decision makers to have direct experiences themselves through immersions. Together, these various initiatives seem on course to contribute realism and ideas.

But to what extent they, or the high level panel, will think imaginatively and radically, based on what we now know (from the Voices and from other sources) about people's ideas of wellbeing and good quality of life, and illbeing and bad quality of life, remains to be seen. Let me propose two basics.

Put those who are last first. The MDGs picked low hanging fruit. The easiest way to achieve the MDGs was to improve the conditions of those who were most accessible and least poor: those closer to centres, on better roads, socially least marginalized, least powerless. More people could be shifted, or enabled to shift themselves, above the thresholds, or to avoid death, or to gain sanitation, or to go to school, by following this strategy. It is time now to turn this on its head, to start with those most deprived: the marginalised and excluded, the displaced, migrants, the poorest (the 'bottom poor'), those who are sick and weak, the aged and infirm, the mentally ill, the disabled, the victims of discrimination, those

most insecure, and among all these and more generally, women, the girl child and children. Let the test of any country be how it treats those of its citizens who are weakest and worst off, like these.

Put those who are first last. The new policies and targets should apply to all countries, not just the low income or so-called developing countries. In part this is because about three quarters of the poor people of our world now live in middle income countries. In part it is because of the devastating but still under-recognised findings of Wilkinson and Pickett (2009). Curves for both happiness and life expectancy flatten off at around \$25,000 per capita. Wellbeing is then related to inequality. It is inequality, not growth, which determines wellbeing and illbeing. To quote Wilkinson and Pickett (2009: 181):

‘Across *whole* populations, rates of mental illness are five times higher in the most unequal compared to the least unequal societies. Similarly, in more unequal societies people are five times as likely to be imprisoned, six times as likely to be clinically obese, and murder rates may be many times higher. The reason why these differences are so big is, quite simply, because the effects of inequality are not confined just to the least well-off: instead they affect the vast majority of the population.’

The case is powerful that all countries, and especially those which are wealthier, should be monitored, and should monitor themselves, for indices of equality and of wellbeing and illbeing. The word ‘redistribution’ has disappeared from our common vocabulary. Is it not time it was back, and in the interests of the wellbeing of the rich as well as that of the poor?

No Need to Wait

But 2015 is a long way off. If 2015 means 31 December 2014, it is over two years away. If it means 31 December 2015, then it is over three years away. There is no need to wait. There is an agenda for now. It is three RRs.

Reflexivity. This is sometimes called Self-critical Epistemological Awareness. It is struggling to be aware of one’s own orientation, values, predispositions, biases, vocabulary and mental categories for interpreting and living effectively in the world. Arguably, reflexivity should be a part of all university courses, with critical examination of how the courses and their disciplines, vocabulary and ways of thinking have influenced the orientations, mindsets and values of students, and how different these might have been if they had been doing other courses. Yet to my knowledge, this is very, very rare.

Realism. Without delay, trying to be more in touch and up to date with what is happening for poorer and marginalised people on the ground. The Reality Check Approach (Sida, 2008-11) is one potent and tested means for doing this, and

could be adopted in all countries, high, middle and low income alike. Immersions are another. Rapid realism is one way to characterise this: avoiding the delays in learning inherent in so much research.

Reversals. This is to reverse the paradigm drift to the Newtonian left hemisphere of the brain, and to establish a better balance. It is to reverse the momentum towards ever greater inequality. It is to reverse the glorification and acceptance of greed, and the rationalisations that go with that, and to recognise and strive for responsible wellbeing by and for all.

Two thoughts come from the earlier Voices. A poor man in the Kyrgyz Republic said:

‘If somebody’s wellbeing is based on the illbeing of someone else, it is not a true wellbeing’

And for Nigeria, which in surveys comes out as the happiest country in our world, it was striking that the definitions of wellbeing, besides being strong on settling one’s children (also widespread elsewhere) emphasised being able to help other people. Perhaps the Nigerians have a lesson about wellbeing there for the rest of us.

But is there a bigger reversal, a more radical reversal, linked with all the above? We, the non-poor have focused on ‘the poor’. We, as it were, ‘other’ them. They are people we try to help. But is this in part a comfortable diversion and evasion, looking away from where we should be looking?

We ‘other’ them and preach their rights
While missing others from our sights
Let’s bring those others within range
The rich and powerful have to change
We, all of us, we have to change.

In 2001, reviewing the World Development Report that followed the Voices, I wrote

Could the deprivations of poverty and powerlessness confront the responsibilities of wealth and power? Dare we hope for a new self-critical awareness and a redefinition of the goal of development as responsible well-being for and by all, stressing the wellbeing of the poor and weak, and the responsibilities of the rich and strong? And could this lead to World Development Report 2010: Challenging Wealth and Power?

For some reason, this never happened. But could we at least follow 'Voices of the Poor' with 'Choices for the Rich'. Let me not preach, or overindulge my national (English) culture of hypocrisy, but I will leave you and myself with a question. How can we reverse the slide into greater inequality and illbeing? Is there any realistic way except starting with the rich and powerful, and with ourselves?

Finally, let me repeat how grateful am for the honour and opportunity of this occasion. And let me congratulate ISS again on its remarkable record and this landmark 60th anniversary which give so much to celebrate. *Thank you.*

Robert Chambers

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Older sources can have lasting value.**

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