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**Book reviews
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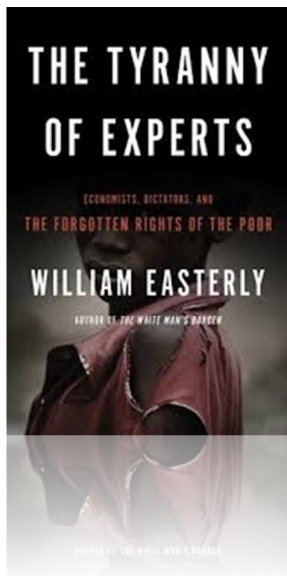
Obra Social "la Caixa"



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The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor

Easterly, William, (2014), Basic Books, New York.



“There is no justification today for Gates and Blair to celebrate five years of alleged autocratic success in one country on one shaky dimension –Ethiopia on child mortality– while ignoring centuries of experience from around the world.”

“Development lent unintended support for suppressing minority rights in the name of putting the nation’s collective well-being above all else.”

“The technocratic illusion is that poverty results from a shortage of expertise, whereas poverty is really about a shortage of rights.”

“The dictator whom the experts expect will accomplish the technical fixes to technical problems is not the solution; he is the problem.”

Summary

Development plans that the West creates for so-called developing nations have up to now followed toxic short-term approaches that ignored the historical trajectory of the recipient countries and the rights of the poor. William Easterly criticises this technocratic approach to development in *The Tyranny of Experts* and calls for a new debate to guide us away from the experts who manage the World Bank, UN, USAID, and organisations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

From the birth of development policies in the last century until today, poverty has been seen as a technical problem whose solution is best left in the hands of experts. This perspective offers solutions for the symptoms of poverty but does not analyse the cause, namely, a lack of political and economic freedom. In an attempt to achieve the common good of all nations, donors have collaborated with supposedly benevolent dictators by granting them the power to implement development plans. This partnership has often been motivated by political advantages for the donor countries – while individual rights were ignored. Now is the moment to break the development stereotypes of ‘victims and saviours’, and support individuals rather than nations, respect the rights of the poor, and create a mindset in which everyone is equal. Only then, may we finally end global poverty.

The author

William Easterly has a PhD in Economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and is an expert in political economics of development. He has worked in Africa, Latin America, and Russia; and was a researcher at the World Bank until 2001. Today he is a professor of economics at New York University (NYU) and director of the *Development Research Institute* (the 2009 winner of the BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge Award). He has written two books, *The White Man's Burden* and *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, and writes opinion columns for numerous publications – including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, and *The Washington Post*. *Foreign Policy Magazine* included him among its Top 100 Global Thinkers in 2008 and 2009, and he is among the 100 most cited economists in the world.

Key ideas and opinion

Professor William Easterly presents a **well-documented critique of the flaws and weaknesses of the technocratic approach that has dominated a century of development plans for poor nations. The author directly attacks the World Bank** (where he worked until being dismissed after publishing an extremely critical article in *The Financial Times* in 2001) and the outdated and ineffective paternalism exercised by this institution, and other large aid organisations such as the UN, USAID, and British development agency (DFID).

The author points out that **although the World Bank insists that it is non-political, it has always represented the interests of those nations that manage the bank – especially the United States.** This interest has led to the bank to collaborating with dictators when implementing development plans, **while ignoring the causes of poverty – namely, a lack of rights and freedoms.** From colonisation until the Cold War, it was the great powers that most benefited from the technocratic approach. But the time has come to reopen the debate. **The author advocates a shift towards free development,** where solutions arise from the free association of individuals with spontaneous ideas. The starting point must be freedom for the people – followed by a focus on their material needs. The act of simply viewing nations as equals helps create a strong and credible basis for eradicating poverty.

History of the concept of development

Easterly starts his book with a **broad overview of the history of the concept of development economics** in order to explain why the technocratic approach came to rule, and why “authoritarian development” was imposed instead of “free development”. **Authoritarian development** is understood as the result of authoritarian

rulers accepting advice from various experts in order to be seen by the outside world as well intentioned. In contrast, **free development** is built on experience and modern history, and based on a spontaneous system for solving problems that is led by free individuals with political and economic rights. The first approach states that the problems of the poor are the symptoms of poverty, and not the cause. However, the author argues that **the cause of poverty is the absence of political and economic rights**. Experts believe that dictators will carry out technical solutions to technical problems – but the real problem is the presence of a dictatorship. For Easterly, this is the cause of the error in many approaches to development, especially those approaches developed by the World Bank.

The debate that Easterly now wants to reopen, was initially settled very quickly in favour of the technocrats, and the approach had already been imposed before Harry Truman's Marshall Plan in 1949 – the first official development project. **The focus on a 'blank slate' when designing a development plan was pioneered in China two decades prior, when the technocratic model of the Rockefeller Foundation managed to redirect the focus of attention away from the dignity and rights of the population, and towards supporting the political interests of the United States (with regard to immigration), and of the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, who sought to preserve absolute power.** That first application of authoritarian development was a failure, as demonstrated by the rise of Mao Zedong in Beijing in the same year that Truman launched his much-publicised Marshall Plan in Europe.

In Africa, Britain put into practice the same strategy for saving its valuable colonial empire. The attempted projection of the image of the benevolent autocrat proved unconvincing in the long term, and did not prevent decolonisation. However, other 'benevolent' dictators soon arrived in the form of local leaders – who the US rushed to support as part of a global strategy at the beginning of the long Cold War.

The balance finally tilted towards authoritarian development on April 9th 1948. While the cases of China and Britain were examples of a technocratic approach favoured by obsolete Western policies (colonialism and semi-colonialism), it was revealed in 1948 that this approach was politically useful for powers that still exist today. **In 1949, the newly opened World Bank sent a delegation to Colombia, its first mission after Europe. In a report made on the country's needs, the agency decided to completely ignore recent history** – including the conflict that Colombia was suffering, known as *La Violencia*, that was keeping the nation in a state of constant suspense. Of course, these **conclusions were well received by Columbian President Gomez, who was thus able to continue his authoritarian rule.** The Cold War had begun a year earlier, and the CIA had identified Colombia as susceptible to communism. **So began a long tradition of World Bank loans to authoritarian regimes in order to secure key partnerships for America in its struggle against the Soviets.** The technocratic development policies that have remained pervasive until the present day were thus consolidated.

The technocratic consensus emerged then, through three events around the globe: 1) the overlap of Western colonial interests with the interests of a Chinese autocrat in the suppression of the Chinese people's individual rights; 2) the overlap of British colonial interests with the leaders of postcolonial Africa in the suppression of Africans' individual rights; and 3) the overlap of American Cold War interests in Colombia with those of an autocratic in the suppression of Colombians' individual rights.

In recent years, a new discussion has emerged among researchers that **calls for an analysis of three new dimensions: history; non-national factors; and spontaneous solutions** that arise through politics, markets, and technology.

The blank slate versus learning from history

Easterly encapsulates the current 'blank slate approach' by describing plans by **Bill Gates** and his foundation to eradicate child poverty in Ethiopia, as well as the African development project that former British prime minister **Tony Blair** initiated during his tenure. Neither Gates nor Blair realised that the Ethiopian government (with whom they were cooperating) prohibited, for example, food aid to political opponents. Easterly suggests that both **Gates and Blair ignored politics on the road to their goals**, highlighting the weakness of the technocratic approach.

The author also notes that for America and Britain, Ethiopia represented a Christian island in the middle of an Islamic sea, and was therefore suitable for the political objectives of both nations. **Neither abuses against opponents, nor Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi's violence against his population, made the Western nations rethink their strategy** - a short-term victory justified turning a blind eye to the actions of another 'benevolent autocrat'. **According to Easterly, the blank slate approach has justified autocratic activities for too long, and it must end.**

Nations vs individuals

Another obvious fact about the design and implementation of development plans is that they **always focus on the fate of nations, rather than on the future of citizens**. This '**national obsession**' has been in the interests of many poor states' governments, which have accordingly declared themselves to be the managers of development plans in their countries – thus controlling all donations. **As a result, development plans have inadvertently contributed to the elimination of the rights of many minorities in the name of an assumed national common good.** Yet Easterly argues that national forces are not as important as we believe. Nations with the highest growth rates in one period are often not the fastest growers in the following period, and given that annual national growth rates are extremely volatile, it follows that national economic policies are not decisive.

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It is worthwhile making a long-term analysis to uncover the key trends beyond national policies – an approach that is ignored under the blank slate approach. **Factors such as technology or values are related to civilisations, rather than the borders of current nations. Easterly denounces the nationalist obsession of the World Bank**, which aims to ensure that political ideas on development match the needs of the leaders of poor countries (who are mostly autocrats). As a result, individual rights are suppressed in the name of national success.

At this point, the author makes a plea for migration as a solution for individual and global development, and criticises those who warn of a brain drain. In his view, the march of talent to another country that can make better use of talent is proof that individual freedom can solve concrete problems of global development.

Deliberate design versus spontaneous solutions

In the discussion at the heart of this book, the author stresses **that spontaneous alternative development solutions, produced by entrepreneurs, businessmen, and technology innovators, have been ignored**. For Easterly, the **most effective approach to development draws on groupings of persons who solve problems based on the knowledge they hold, as well as incentives provided**.

The author recalls the ‘invisible hand’ proposed by Adam Smith in the eighteenth century as the basis of classical liberalism. According to the author, **the debate should not be ‘markets versus governments’ but ‘individual rights versus state power’**. He argues that the technocratic approach has produced the worst of all worlds: experts in charge of solving societal problems who transfer this role to other agents (autocrats) who avoid tests provided by markets and the ballot box. As a result, **success goes unrewarded and failure is unpunished in economic and political terms. Nothing motivates the leaders to avoid failure**.

The ‘invisible hand’, on the other hand, pushes non-experts towards something that they are naturally good at – learning on the job. The benefits and profits that are obtained create the desire to do even better. This is the opposite of the approach pursued by Bill Gates and the UN Millennium Development Goals: namely, that of first establishing goals and then looking for the route to reach those goals. **If targets are fixed from the beginning, development programs are restricted and unable to react to obstacles encountered along the way**.

Easterly highlights, in this final part of the book, that **markets and technologies are spontaneous factors that interact and can achieve more than technocrats in terms of development**. He argues that we must distance ourselves from this effort to personalise development and to calculate each of its steps. Instead, we should learn from the past and let spontaneous solutions, proposed and supported by free individuals, lead the way to an emancipation from the tyranny of experts.



According to the author, **we must not let anxiety about the material needs of the poor overshadow their rights. He gives the example of Martin Luther King**, who worried greatly about the poverty of African-Americans, but never deviated from the primary goal of achieving equal rights. Easterly concludes the book with **recommendations** for how the reader can become a source of individual solutions. **Protesting when your government tramples on the rights of others and ignores democracy**, albeit through development aid agencies, is an important step according to Easterly. The stereotype of wise Western technocrats caring for the helpless victims of poor nations is no longer sustainable; and development policies must abandon their autocratic approach in order to survive. As the author concludes: **'It is time at last for all men and women to be equally free'**.