The Roots Of Dysfunction
BY J. STEPHEN MORRISON

THE TYRANNY OF EXPERTS: ECONOMISTS, DICTATORS, AND THE FORGOTTEN RIGHTS OF THE POOR
By William Easterly
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In The Tyranny of Experts, William Easterly launches a caustic, broadside indictment of development experts who dedicate their careers to ending poverty. In his view, experts at the World Bank, the United Nations, foundations, and governments including those of the United States and the United Kingdom routinely fall prey to the delusion of defining poverty as a technical problem to be solved through simplistic top-down technical solutions. It is a problem, he says, that cuts across all development sectors, including health.

Easterly argues that this fundamental bias leads to an ahistorical “blank slate” view of developing societies, compounded by willful neglect of malgovernance and abuse of individual liberties. In putting concrete programs in place, technocrats create rigid goals, tailor approaches with little regard to local communities’ demands and evolving market opportunities, and then assemble dubious short-term data to confirm success. Most disturbingly, time and again these experts strike convenient but perilous bargains with “benevolent autocrats” upon whom they confer power, finance, and legitimacy. According to Easterly, when unchecked authoritarian power ignites periodic violent reactions by repressed majorities, there is the all-too-common tendency among development experts to lapse soon thereafter into a convenient amnesia. Throughout his far-ranging, often rambling treatise, Easterly reserves a special opprobrium, at times ad hominem, for Bill Gates and Tony Blair. He seems particularly piqued by their fulsome embrace of former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and claims of major gains in child mortality.

What special import do Easterly’s arguments have for health? He delivers a forceful, fair warning of the grave risks created by uncritical donors’ embrace of autocrats who promise continued stability, economic growth, and high returns on health investments. He does the global health community an important service to the degree that he stokes unease among donors who erect vast health programs—involving hundreds of millions of dollars—in such authoritarian countries as Uganda, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, with neither regard for those programs’ long-term political sustainability nor a clear vision of how to manage a transition to “country ownership” that will not deepen autocratization.

Recent published analyses continue to document the violence, disappearances, and detentions in Uganda,
Rwanda,
and Ethiopia,
in support of Easterly’s basic argument. The recent surge of homophobia in Uganda, Nigeria, and elsewhere in Africa and Asia has brought home the reality that aging autocrats such as Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni will indeed eagerly and quite capriciously turn to violent bigotry against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations if there is a perceived short-term political gain. This is done with no regard for civil liberties or HIV/AIDS and other health programs, and with full confidence that donors have little leverage, given that humanitarian programs by definition cannot be ethically suspended.

Beyond his core, sobering warning, Easterly’s insights in regard to health and the future of development writ large are thin. There is little acknowledgement of how well democratic countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Ghana, and Tanzania have performed. There is even less acknowledgement that rights and social mobilization have been fundamental to the global HIV/AIDS movement and global response and, more recently, to expanded international action to address maternal, newborn, and child health. The same is true of evolving thinking on how to reform global polio eradication efforts to make them more responsive to community needs and fears.

Autocrats are a reality in both low- and lower-middle-income countries where most global health dollars flow. The question, therefore, is not whether to stay or leave, but how to engage better in terms of both strategic vision and tactical, concrete steps. Regrettably, the solutions Easterly proposes are broad, nonspecific principles, difficult to argue with but ultimately unsatisfying: Put rights first (“What you can do is advocate that the poor should have the same rights as the rich”); restore history to center stage; and ensure that development approaches emerge from the ground up, tapping the spontaneous opportunities that grow out of the free flow of values, networks, technology, and markets in democratically governed societies.

Easterly has dissected very well the roots of dysfunction among development experts and their interdependencies with “benevolent autocrats.” To find actionable solutions requires much more original thinking.

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