



Making a Better World?

How being reflexive could make us more effective development practitioners

Jane Carter, August 2014

Rosalind Eyben is a name that is likely to be familiar to many readers of this website – probably particularly for her work at IDS on power, knowledge, and theories of change, and her engagement in “The Big Push Forward” (1). Although she recently retired from her position of Professorial Research Fellow, she remains very active in development circles and has published two books in the space of less than a year. The most recent is a very personal reflection on the evolution of development thinking and practice from the 1960s to the present, in which she calls for all of us working in development to use reflexive practice (2).

Critical reflection

Rosalind’s book is indeed searingly self-critical – looking back on her family upbringing, her first marriage to a colonial officer in what was then the Belgian Congo, her doctoral research in Burundi, her work for DFID as chief social adviser based in London and then as country representative in Bolivia, and finally her teaching and research at IDS. There are many poignant anecdotes, some of the most striking being those related to her family. She recalls making scrambled eggs with her Marxist mother, who used the opportunity to explain dialectical materialism; and (much later) helping her father with the washing up – during which he took a long pause and admitted that he had deliberately ignored the horrors committed by Stalin because he wanted to believe in the good of a communist state. Of her own earlier thinking and practice, she does not spare herself. For example, although an anthropologist herself, in her drive to promote a standard approach to DFID’s social advice to projects, she downplayed the importance of local cultural knowledge and told colleagues that, “*You can always mug up on the ethnography on the plane*”. Reflecting on the way that we can be vulnerable to self-deceit when convinced that we are morally in the right, she comments later, “*My enthusiasm made me blind*”.

These and other stories are related in order to illustrate Rosalind’s main argument: that all those working in development need to think carefully about what they say and do, why they behave and decide as they do, and how other people involved perceive them. Drawing on the writing of Donald (not Edgar) Schön about reflexive practice (3), she argues for the need to think in triple loops – informing oneself thoroughly before making a decision (single loop, and something all good professionals do as a matter of course); querying the assumptions informing one’s action (double loop), and then examining the self to shed further light on these assumptions (triple loop). Her book not only shows how her own thinking evolved over her professional career, but also how international development practice evolved – in tandem with global events. She is critical of recent development trends, in particular attempts to promote “best practice” – she argues for “good enough” practice that takes into account power dimensions; and results-based management – which she argues runs contrary to a rights-based approach.

A more effective poverty focus?

Looking back over international events and trends in development thinking, Rosalind pin-points the second half of the 1990s as the time of greatest hope and optimism that “something serious” would be done about reducing world poverty. She was then herself a key player in British development policy, and she describes an attempt to link trade talks to improved working conditions for labourers in developing countries. Yet her efforts to promote a set of Social Policy Principles, to be signed by the G77 countries, came to nothing. G77 representatives rejected the proposal outright – interpreting them as an attempt to impose onerous conditions that would maintain them at a competitive disadvantage. She writes, “*I found it difficult to comprehend that what I saw as a truly benevolent enterprise – the construction of a global moral community through equitable independence – was regarded with deep suspicion by those to whom I believed such an enterprise would bring the most benefit.*”

The lesson Rosalind highlights here is that whatever one's personal ideology and personal relationships, it is very difficult (and possibly unwise) for those in donor recipient countries to separate the individual representative from their perception of the donor country. Her observations from Bolivia are even more telling in this regard. Of course they refer to DFID, but also serve as a learning for other donors. She notes how shocked she was to be told by a Bolivian that DFID was "*widely known as the aid agency that for years and years financed rich farmers to exploit the poor*". When based there, she rejoiced in the decision of DFID to move into expansive offices with a large and beautiful meeting room overlooking the whole of La Paz. This she gladly used to convene donor meetings and consultations with civil society. It was only afterwards that she realised that the message the room conveyed to Bolivians could have essentially been "business as usual" in terms of a lack of real commitment to the poor.

There are many messages to ponder from Rosalind's book, particularly with regard to one's own assumptions and behaviour in development work. It is highly recommended reading; for another review, see Duncan Green (4).

References

- (1) The Big Push Forward. Accessed on August 24, 2014. <http://bigpushforward.net/>
- (2) Rosalind Eyben (2014). *International Aid and the Making of a Better World: Reflexive Practice (Rethinking Development)*. April 2014. Routledge London and New York. <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415656740/>
- (3) Donald Schön (1984). *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. Aldershot: Ashgate Arena.
- (4) Duncan Green (2014). *International Aid and the Making of a Better World: a great new book*. <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/international-aid-and-the-making-of-a-better-world-a-great-new-book/>