Save the Pawns
Too many aid agencies treat people in developing countries like chess pieces
BY TATE WATKINS

_The Tyranny of Experts_ opens with a striking anecdote: In 2010, soldiers removed 20,000 people from their Ohio farmland at gunpoint. The farmers and their families had lived on the tract for decades, but they had to make way for a British company’s forestry plantation, a project that was backed by the World Bank’s private-investment arm. The soldiers burned some residents’ grain stores and houses, in the process killing an eight-year-old boy trapped inside a building.

You might struggle to recall the atrocity. Author William Easterly explains why. While the events he reports happened as described, they didn't unfold in rural Ohio. The setting was East Africa—specifically Uganda.

Easterly has devoted much of his career to analyzing global development, a catch-all term for efforts by rich countries to economically improve poor ones. These undertakings have varying goals—some aim to increase access to education, some to decrease the rate at which young children die from disease, others to teach tropical farmers better growing techniques. A professor at New York University and a former World Bank economist, Easterly has for years critiqued the technocratic approaches that he says dominate the field. The subtitles of his first two books illustrate his perspective: _Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Harm and So Little Good_, and _Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics_.

“Morally neutral approaches to poverty do not exist,” Easterly writes in his latest book. “Any approach to development will either respect the rights of the poor or it will violate them.” There are real risks to liberty in the dominant approach he describes today: a class of experts (often brought in from foreign countries) works with government bureaucrats in a poor country to decide the future of its people.

“The conventional approach to economic development, to making poor countries rich,” he writes, “is based on a technocratic illusion: the belief that poverty is a purely technical problem amenable to such technical solutions as fertilizers, antibiotics, or nutritional supplements.” In Uganda, the World Bank experts saw the forestry project as a solution to poverty, and had no objection to seeing the government displace thousands of local residents by force. Yet the timber plantation, Easterly notes, was no help to the families who were forced from their land. It’s hard to believe that the farmers’ land rights would have been so easily discarded—or that the resulting violence would be so obscure—if these decisions had indeed been imposed on Ohioans.

This book finds instructive anecdotes in many historical times and places—pre-communist China, Colombia during “La Violencia,” Benin after it escapes colonialism. Easterly makes clear that today’s consensus about how to promote development predates its “official birth” under Harry Truman in 1949. He goes back to Woodrow Wilson’s 1919, when colonial and racial condescension was rife, and the world knew less about the damage the “best and brightest” can do to any society, even with the best of intentions.

The default approach of development organizations, he says, is implicit acceptance, if not outright support, of whoever happens to control a country. Poor citizens are rarely consulted in any meaningful way. Experts who see poverty as a set of technical problems ignore how political institutions—or political oppressions—have created those problems. Too many modern development efforts, Easterly argues, wind up overlooking the commonest cause of poverty: “the unchecked power of the state against poor people without rights.”

Throughout this book, Easterly returns over and over to three modern illusions. The first is the belief that conscious design can bring about development much more quickly and easily than spontaneous solutions—which the author insists will surface wherever people are afforded economic and political rights. A related theme is that technocrats favor the collective abstraction of a “national interest” over the reality of individual interests.

The third theme is that outsiders often ignore historical, cultural, and local considerations, approaching a poor country as if it were a “blank slate.” Easterly describes how foreign economists advised Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s post-independence dictator, to use government investment to develop industry. Nkrumah followed their prescription. To raise the funds needed, he taxed cocoa, one of the few industries already succeeding in Ghana—but a crop which happened to grow in the mountains inhabited by his main opposition. The taxes eventually throttled Ghana’s cocoa business and wider economy, while Nkrumah exerted himself more and more to repress the opposition.

Easterly’s examples are sometimes more loose anecdotes than continuous narrative. But they support
his thesis that residents of poor countries rarely have any say over how billions of development dollars are channeled. And that few of the development experts who wield that power ever question this arrangement.

Today’s development problems, Easterly argues, come down to a “debate that never happened” between two Nobel-winning economists of the twentieth century. Swede Gunnar Myrdal saw national governments as the necessary mechanism of development. “From the development point of view,” Myrdal wrote, “the prevailing attitudes and patterns of individual performance in life and at work” are “deficient.” He advocated “putting obligations on people and supporting them by force” so that national development could be attained.

Austrian Friedrich Hayek, on the other hand, championed the benefits that arise from a society’s spontaneous order, in which individual rights allow people to freely choose, and they migrate naturally to the optimal arrangements for exchanging goods, services, and ideas. Hayek saw no reason that poor societies couldn’t prosper in the same way that Western ones had centuries earlier. The missing ingredient was simply giving the residents of impoverished countries those same economic and political rights.

Myrdal’s view won over the international aid apparatus, says Easterly, because it’s the one in which technocracy is necessary. If expert design instead of evolved solutions is placed at the heart of development, then central planners will have lots of job opportunities. If history, language, and local knowledge are defined as irrelevant or even retrograde, then many pedigreed experts will need to be brought in from the outside. “The sleight of hand that focuses attention on technical solutions,” Easterly writes, “while covering up violations of the rights of real people, is the moral tragedy of development today.”

Philanthropists face some of the same risks as government agencies when it comes to helping the overseas poor. Private donors too can be tempted, as an illusory “shortcut,” to apply their expertise to help a population without respecting the individuals themselves. But philanthropists can also make decisions, much more nimbly than government agencies, to avoid actions that undercut the individual rights and dignity of poor people. These things, wise helpers will recognize, are not only as important as material needs on moral grounds, they are also the only reliable long-term bases for material prosperity.

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from public health to infrastructure to agronomy, with the hope of evolving a foundation for greater development. He started with an initial gift of $50 million from George Soros and $70 million from other donors.

His projects were organized by five-year plans, but all too predictably the villages did not keep pace with the New York office’s script. Munk focuses on two model locations. The first is Dertu, a dusty crossroads for camel-herding Somali nomads in northeast Kenya. In addition to public-health and education interventions (malaria nets, free lunches to entice children to attend school, employing itinerant teachers to follow the herdsman), the plan for Dertu calls for changing the quality and marketability of livestock—the region’s only commodity. The MVP planners, however, collide with local culture.

They fail at their principal goal of opening a livestock market where a more liquid trade in camels could occur without the dayslong trek to the region’s capital. The problem? “The whole concept of selling one’s livestock is antithetical to Somali values,” Munk learns. Rather than a commodity like cotton or oranges, camels are “an end in themselves.” They are a signifier of a Somali herdsman’s manliness, honor, piety, and other virtues that have little place in most Westerners’ notion of “development.”

What about the occasions where Somalis, in a pinch, do reluctantly sell their animals? The belief that the long journey to a distant market was inhibiting trade was also misplaced. As the local MVP director told Munk after ruminating on his failure, “These pastoralists, they will travel even 400 kilometers to get an extra hundred shillings.” Time is not money when you are a nomad.

In his writings, technocratic Sachs is dismissive of culture as a barrier to development. “What look like immutable social values,” he argues, “turn out to be highly malleable to economic circumstances and opportunities.” He is proven wrong by the residents of Dertu and other spots in the real world.

Many of the people Sachs sets out to aid don’t necessarily even regard themselves as poor. The Dertu, they style themselves the lineal descendants of Abraham, take pride in their way of life, and are uninterested in exchanging it for something else. From the locals’ point of view, the fruits of Sachs’s intervention in their home region are depressing. Rather than living on the range, some of their neighbors become “drop-outs” who live on handouts.

The people of Ruhiira, a lusher outpost among the rolling hills of southwestern Uganda, are not as culturally impermeable as the Somalis of Dertu. Yet here too, the project’s big schemes run up against local notions of economy and agriculture. Growing the staple crops of a subsistence lifestyle (like matoke, the bananas that are Uganda’s most popular foodstuff) is deemed undesirable by the MVP bureaucracy. They push food crops that are less prized but have commercial promise (like maize), or specialties that could command a high price on the international market (like cardamom).

Sachs’s regional director convinces some Ruhiirans to grow maize, and with the purchase of fertilizer, a laudable bumper crop is produced. But selling the output proves nearly impossible. Transport devours the profit margin.

Residents become desperate to trade so they can buy the foods they actually want to eat (they regard corn as “school food” or “prison food”). Soon, with the maize either spoiling or being sold at giveaway prices, the market collapses. Villagers ask, not unreasonably, why don’t we just grow what we like to consume?

Sachs, meanwhile, cannot understand why Ugandans and other Africans aren’t making greater use of fertilizer. Drawing on the work of Esther Duflo, an M.I.T. economist who has worked closely on the subject, Munk notes that at the beginning of the planting season “nearly every farmer intended to use and could afford to buy at least a small amount of fertilizer.” Yet when the time came, for their own reasons, only one third of them did.

The MVP project’s massive free distribution of malaria nets creates other problems. The handouts put local vendors out of business. Then there is no supply when nets have to be replaced. Munk’s book details the premature babies who die because the net is no longer available. The runaway prices, the market collapses. Villagers ask, not unreasonably, why don’t we just grow what we like to consume?

The Millennium Villages Project was supposed to have reached successful completion this year. Instead, the project grinds along with few triumphs and no end in sight. Certain humbler long-term efforts that worked with human nature and local culture (like the land-ownership transfers described on pages 46–49), instead of against them, could have wrought much bigger effects for far less money. But of course that wouldn’t have been as exciting as building a utopian community.

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