

Experts Fighting Global Poverty – An Alarming Analysis

Melina C. Kalfelis

Abstract:

The economist William Easterly continues to challenge development work. His survey puts an emphasis on the dominance of a technocratic approach in the fight against global poverty. In doing so he compares it to diverging views through a historic, political, and economic analysis. Authoritarian development comprises the experts' and governments' search for technical solution strategies. Free development, though, bonds a personal-rights consolidation and spontaneous decision-making by individuals. Both ideas were imagined to pave the way out of poverty. But it was the first that has gained acceptance since World War I and still applies today. The author questions the success of the authoritarian idea after 65 years of fighting against poverty and demands a debate on the "technocratic illusion". His new book, *The Tyranny of Experts. Economists, Dictators and the forgotten Rights of the Poor*, marks its beginning.

How to cite:

Kalfelis, Melina C.: „Experts Fighting Global Poverty – An Alarming Analysis [Review on: Easterly, William: *The Tyranny of Experts. Economists, Dictators and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.]“. In: KULT_online 42 (2015).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2015.892>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

Experts Fighting Global Poverty – An Alarming Analysis

Melina C. Kalfelis

Easterly, William: *The Tyranny of Experts. Economists, Dictators and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. 380 S., Hardcover, 30.80 Euro. ISBN: 9780465031252

The third book of William Easterly challenges the technocratic nature of developmental work. In his previous monograph (*The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, Oxford 2006) he criticizes the method of big aid-financed pushes to bring growth to a nation and raise the living standards of the poor. This argument reflects the scientific debate of expenditures through development aid that is closely connected to bad governance in underdeveloped countries and misuse of aid money by the people in power. In his new book the author tackles the problem of power from a different angle. As a lead he postulates a "technocratic illusion" in the history of economic development: That poverty is a merely technical problem that needs technical solutions conducted by experts. Therefore, Easterly continues, experts supported moderate autocrats with good intentions (who have the sole power to implement their strategies) instead of individual freedom rights of the poor. The book calls this logic of action authoritarian development instead of free development. It reflects the belief that conscious strategies by experts are more effective in fighting poverty than spontaneous solutions by individuals. The author now turns this subtle idea into the actual problem. He sees "(...) the unchecked power of the state against poor people without rights" (p. 6) as the real root of poverty. Based on this he wants to start a debate: A debate about poverty alleviation through authoritarian control, advised by experts and against spontaneous solutions of individual thinking.

The book is a mosaic of historical key moments, discourse fragments and particular examples, that provide a basis for the debate on autocracy versus freedom. Easterly eases the reader into a complex task through a brief and concise chapter structure. Overall there are five parts, which include three to four chapters, each divided into sub-chapters. These sub-chapters mostly build on each other, but sometimes jump fluently from one aspect to the other.

The first part is an introduction to the debate, as summarized briefly above. In the second part, he analyzes three important cases in history that helped autocratic leadership to outstrip the progress of individual rights: The semi-colonial interest of the US in China in the early 20th century, the British colonial effort to maintain power in Africa during/after World War II, and finally the US Cold War interests in Colombia. All three cases marked a moment when individual rights got suppressed in favor of economic development through technocratic knowledge. This applies until today.

The last three parts of the book focus on contradicting arguments within the debate of authoritarian and free development. So, part three discusses the lacking consideration of history within the technocratic approach: To recognize historical events of a current nation could give a lesson about specific poverty causes. But this does not apply to the universalizing logic of technical solutions since technocratic strategies seem unable to consider or adapt to idiosyncratic characteristics. The fourth part points out that the development debate seems to prioritize national prosperity before the well being of individuals. Eventually (part five), Easterly questions what lies behind the authoritarian development reasoning: The experts' conviction that the predicting path of cognizant strategy is the better method to fight global poverty than promoting the freedom of individuals. Although, he admits, this freedom could strengthen the individuals' abilities. For that matter there could be a new approach of solving problems spontaneously – to nourish from an inexhaustible world of knowledge and creativity.

William Easterly's quest for a new research emphasis on free development may be marking a turning point that concerns scientists and practitioners. Instead of criticizing development action within its inner logic of technocratic structure, he dares to challenge the logic itself. Not an easy task to undertake: The book seems to hover through historic events; illustrations and theories taking the reader into a journey. At the same time the author makes clear from the start that he is ready to use simplifications. He consciously leaves out important specifics, like who is promoting authoritarian development. He wants to question the consensus in development that technocratic solutions are the best way to fight global poverty. Instead he wrote an ode to individuals and their competences. Therefore he argues for political rights that were missed out during the last 60 years but might be the protecting shell, which helps a person to break out of his or her own misery.

How provocative, radical and maybe utopian Easterly's thoughts might be, he challenges us in a way that urges the whole international development cooperation to step back. In any case, the book gives an important thought-provoking impulse I am happy to follow.