Editorial

Brian Pratt

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As we enter 2017, the international development community is confronted by multiple challenges, sometimes contradictory, sometimes supportive, while also ambiguous. On the economic and political front, in developed countries there is a confusion of support for free market, globalised cultures clashing with nationalism, protectionism, and isolationism. While the economic crisis which began in 2008 may have been partially mitigated, the results have seen a new aggressive foreign policy in Russia, using external flag-flying to distract from domestic recession, while the same economic forces have led to many Western populations seeking isolationism and a withdrawal from the international crisis and a call for tariff protection. The recently much-lauded BRICs have their own problems, with the recession leading to previous poor governance being exposed due to the end of rapid growth, hence the political crises in South Africa and Brazil, for example. It would appear that in too many countries earlier growth merely heralded an increase in corruption, often on a grand scale, so not surprisingly there are now more calls for programmes on anti-corruption, improved transparency, and accountability throughout many governments and also inter-governmental cooperation programmes.

The inequality which often leads on from the control of resources by small elites, through rent-seeking and other forms of abuse of power, is leading in turn to new forms of populism. As often happens historically, populist movements can be of different political colours and do not always follow a straightforward logic because populist leaders focus on popular conceptions (and often misconceptions) of what it is that has led to the perceived inequalities, stagnating incomes, poor services, and other problems. Hence, we see new forms of nationalism, scapegoating minorities, and straightforward lies from populist leaders directing blame away from those who should be held accountable. Such trends are dangerous for democratic reforms in both developed and developing societies, and impact on socio-economic development, through pressure on international cooperation resources as well as local developing or emerging economies and their government’s own policies and priorities. The increasing polarisation of political positions and assumption by many elites of an entitlement to extreme riches, can sadly lead to increased conflict domestically and internationally; all of which could stall or even reverse some of the many positive changes for ordinary people through the development efforts of the past decades.

In our first issue of 2017, we have three viewpoint articles. Diana Duff Rutherford and Jessica Bachay explore the links between economic-strengthening programmes and child well-being. They argue that a failure to take into account the whole family in economic programmes may lead to the continued transfer of poverty across generations. The study is based on lessons from projects in Liberia and Mozambique, where child nutrition showed little or no sign of improvement in areas of economic-strengthening programmes; the authors argue that such programmes need to have explicit goals of improving child well-being to achieve positive change.

Jon Hellin and Carolina Camacho discuss their findings, mainly based on experience in Mexico, that old ideas of research-driven agricultural extension often fail through too many conflicting priorities, whereas focused extension programmes based on a new technology have more likelihood of successful impact on what happens in the farmers’ fields. This finding is considered important as poorer farmers tend to not benefit from new technological innovation without such support, which needs to focus less on the technical aspects of new technology and more on the social aspects of extension and education.
In our third viewpoint Muttukrishna Sarvananthan, Jeyaprabha Suresh, and Anushani Alagarajah explore why in Sri Lanka, a country marked by apparent gender equality, especially in education, unemployment, and non-participation of women in the economy persists, particularly in the northern districts. One of the reasons, they controversially argue, is that what they term ‘ethno-feminism’ among Tamils in areas of previous conflict restrains rather than assists women in the workplace through misplaced concerns, confusing traditional cultures and norms mixed with post-conflict distrust.

Kaisa Wilson, Wambui Thuita, and Cath Conn, in their study of sanitation needs among Somali women in Kenya, show that the needs and priorities of women are still ignored in favour of those of men. Simple hygiene is, despite its importance for overall health, only one of the priorities of the women, who have other important issues such as fear of open defecation, issues around menstruation, and problems caused by different forms of female genital cutting.

James Keese, Alejandra Camacho, and Aurora Chavez provide a survey of improved cooking stoves in Cuzco, Peru, noting the factors contributing to the adoption and use of these stoves. They demonstrate the overall positive impacts of the new stoves, while noting some of the lessons learnt from their introduction.

Jaco Vermaak contributes to the literature on informal markets in South Africa and their role not only in providing an income but also contributing to socialising aspects for new migrants and young workers, including new friendships for migrants and support adjusting to a new urban environment. The author concludes that greater recognition needs to be given to the importance of such informal markets in the process of development in many communities.

Cathrine Madziva looks at the relationships between a community based organisation and an INGO working with vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe, noting the debate on what really constitutes a community for the very poor and how this in turn is relevant to community-based approaches. The constraints of both the local organisation and the INGO are discussed and the nature of the relationship they managed to form is explored.

Stefan Toepler and Vladimir B. Benevolenski describe the fascinating divergent approaches in modern Russian policy towards non-governmental organisations. On the one hand, the closing of space for democratisation-focused civil society groups, especially those in receipt of foreign funds. On the other hand, considerable legal and financial support for those local NGOs devoted to improved service delivery, reflecting the privatisation of social and welfare services in many parts of Western democracies. So, while legal restrictions have led to a decline in a critical civil society, simultaneously support has been provided for service delivery and apolitical policy formulation where local NGOs are seen as supporting and complementing the state while helping to modernise state social services.

Mavhungu Mafukata, Willie Dhlandhlara, and Grace Kancheya explore whether and to what degree microcredit programmes can help strengthen social capital, using experience from southern Africa. One of the major points made is about the way the savings groups come together to support a member in times of bereavement, as an example of the value of the groups which reaches beyond their simple savings and credit functions.

A second article touching on gender and microcredit, this time in Eritrea, comes from Yonas T. Bahta, Dirk B. Strydom, and Emmanuel Donkor. They show how women still find themselves prejudiced against in terms of access to microcredit in Africa, despite their key economic roles in family survival. They argue that credit, extension services, and technological services still tend to be heavily focused on male farmers and provide very little access for women.

Emmanuel Tumusiime and Marc J. Cohen review ‘Feed the Future’, a major international USAID agricultural support programme in five countries, considering whether it can achieve improvements in food security and local agency. In particular, they look at the nature of ownership of the programmes. They compare the existing practice with current policies promoting local ownership in line with the Paris Declaration and subsequent declarations. The authors conclude that although the general policy and approach of Feed the Future fits local policy and priorities, implementation
is still dominated by foreign contractors rather than local agencies, although this is slowly changing in favour of using local agencies.

Finally, Ailie Tam’s practical note provides experience and tips on the use of electronic fieldwork diaries to enable notes to be multimedia and to improve the accuracy and efficiency of fieldwork.

Notes

1. There is some concern that a similar pattern is emerging with Chinese claims against their neighbours for islands and other boundary disputes.
2. At the time of writing this divide was clear in the pre-election positions of the candidates for the US presidency, and in polarisation over Brexit in the UK.

Brian Pratt
BPratt@intrac.org