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Book Report: The Tyranny of Experts

William Easterly's "Tyranny of Experts" challenges the widespread belief that nicely-packaged technical solutions can adequately solve poverty. Pointing to the decades of ineffective development led by multilateral institutions, academics, and authoritative leaders, Easterly advocates for greater rights of the individual to innovate and, thus, create meaningful and sustainable development.

Easterly narrates the history of "development", citing the inherently racist and classist origins that emerged as former colonialists were tasked with the economic reconstruction of their former colonies. This scheme allowed them to maintain their position of power, shaping the development under their own framework rather than collaborating with the citizens of each country. Under the guise of expertise, this model was internationally accepted and spread across sectors.

This approach ignored the historical 'power of the peasants', who had already innovated so much without European intervention. Early 20th century Ghanaian cocoa producers knew what the British didn't: that interplanting crops would yield better results than monocrop plantations. The Chinese had perfected the art of potato growing so much so that it was sustaining one of the largest populations in the world: a feat comparable to innovations in modern technology, Easterly argues.

Easterly posits that countries cannot be homogenized and that blanket solutions do not work. Moreover, he argues, governments and experts do not have the necessary knowledge and incentive to get solutions right for every community. Alternatively, when "technocrats" decentralize development and encourage market-driven solutions, competition will incentivize local actors to either innovate new solutions [to personal or societal problems] or recreate and customize existing ones. In this way, local actors can keep the rewards of their innovations and the community also is able to ensure that solutions are permanent. This stands in stark contrast to the long list of collapsed interventions offered by institutions like the World Bank, which often hasn't ensured that communities can manage the projects handed to them (i.e. expensive Port-A-Potties, expensive, water filters, irrigation systems, etc.). The internet, evolution, language, cities were all born of the kind of 'spontaneous design' that Easterly promotes although he recognizes though that some things must be coordinated centrally, primarily social services; infrastructure; a legal framework, pollution, etc.

Whole Planet Foundation has integrated some of the values put forth by Easterly, principally that solutions that are locally designed and implemented are more effective, empowering, and long-lasting. Rather than prescribe development strategies, Whole Planet recognizes the unique

expertise and leadership authority of the institutions it looks to fund. Whole Planet seeks out organizations that prioritize community buy-in and community feedback, recognizing that local leaders as well as the world's "poor" know the intricacies of their strengths and needs better than any expert could. This provides them with both the expertise and incentive to innovate and thrive.