

Robert Chambers, *Rural Development; Putting the Last First*. 246 pgs, Longman, London, 1983 price not indicated.

Chambers, a Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, has subtitled his book *Putting the Last First* indicating not only the ideological position he is taking up but also that the book is aimed primarily at the 'professional', both the academic and the practitioner, who is concerned with or working directly or indirectly in rural development and rural poverty. Chambers takes a refreshingly positive but critical look at the problems of rural poverty and the role of the 'professionals'. His concern is in many respects primarily with the 'outsider', 'the rural tourist', who plans for and designs programmes for rural development. The outsider in this case may be an expatriate but also includes local people who are urban based (and biased!) and who do not spend extended lengths of time with the rural poor.

The first half of the book is taken up with looking at the problem of the 'professional' and the problems of rural poverty, with interesting concepts introduced including the 'deprivation trap' and the 'poverty ratchet'. While Chambers has strong bias throughout the book to the importance of the analysis of situations, the chapter on causes of rural poverty is not entirely adequate and satisfactory but does isolate a number of issues which are of growing concern to anyone working in rural development—concerns expressed earlier in the writings of Freire, Illich, Shumacher and others.

The latter half of the book tries to look at and open up areas of action and ways of operating which will correct the biases and reverse the trend of poverty in rural areas. Chambers uses a number of examples from Asia and Africa south of the Sahara to build up a picture of the possibilities for action. Most of these possibilities, in line with the major aim of the book, focus on the 'professional'—their attitudes, ways of working, interaction with the rural poor, rural elite and political structures. A strong call is made for a committed professional whose values are geared to putting the 'last first'—by listening to and learning from the rural poor and encouraging the development of local control over decisions, resources and actions, and building the capacity of these generally vulnerable and powerless groups to analyse their own situations and act on them.

Chambers is calling for a number of what he calls 'reversals' which in the long or short term must lead to a major change in the status quo in rural areas and in the attitudes of those involved in rural development. These reversals include reversals in learning (who learns from whom?), reversals in management (who makes the decisions for whom and at what levels? from the top or the bottom?), reversals of personal action and commitment on the part of professionals, reversals in the conventional methods of gathering information from rural people (the survey method comes in for a great deal of criticism), and a reversal from participant observation to participant organisation.

Chamber's concern is that the 'new professional' should be a person who can and does critically examine his own actions and biases, a

multidisciplinarian who is open to new information and ideas, to dialogue with the poor, and is innovative in his approach to action. Above all the new professional is a person who knows, cares and acts.

*Rural Development* is a highly readable book, from cover to cover or 'dipping' into it, and should be recommended reading for all students and professionals in the social sciences and in other disciplines that are involved in one way or another with the rural poor—particularly administrators, planners, policy makers and research workers. The development of the 'new professional' who is critical of his own situation and his own actions is long overdue.

*Reviewed by Brigid Willmore, Harare.*