

# Inspiring tales of change against the odds

## FROM POVERTY TO POWER

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REVIEW:

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WE SOUTH Africans often try to “solve the world’s problems” during passionate debates, then laugh about our efforts. It’s a rueful laugh; we think we have little chance of success.

But in *From Poverty to Power*, Duncan Green, head of research at Oxfam, gives hope to optimists among us. He explores how others have changed their societies for the better, from bringing about land reform to toppling political tyrants and kickstarting economies. He deduces what will be required to end world poverty, combat climate change, change world trade inequalities and tackle almost every other injustice and threat facing humans.

It’s a tome vast in scope and more of a reference book than an easy read, but is full of case studies and inspiring anecdotes that make it gripping.

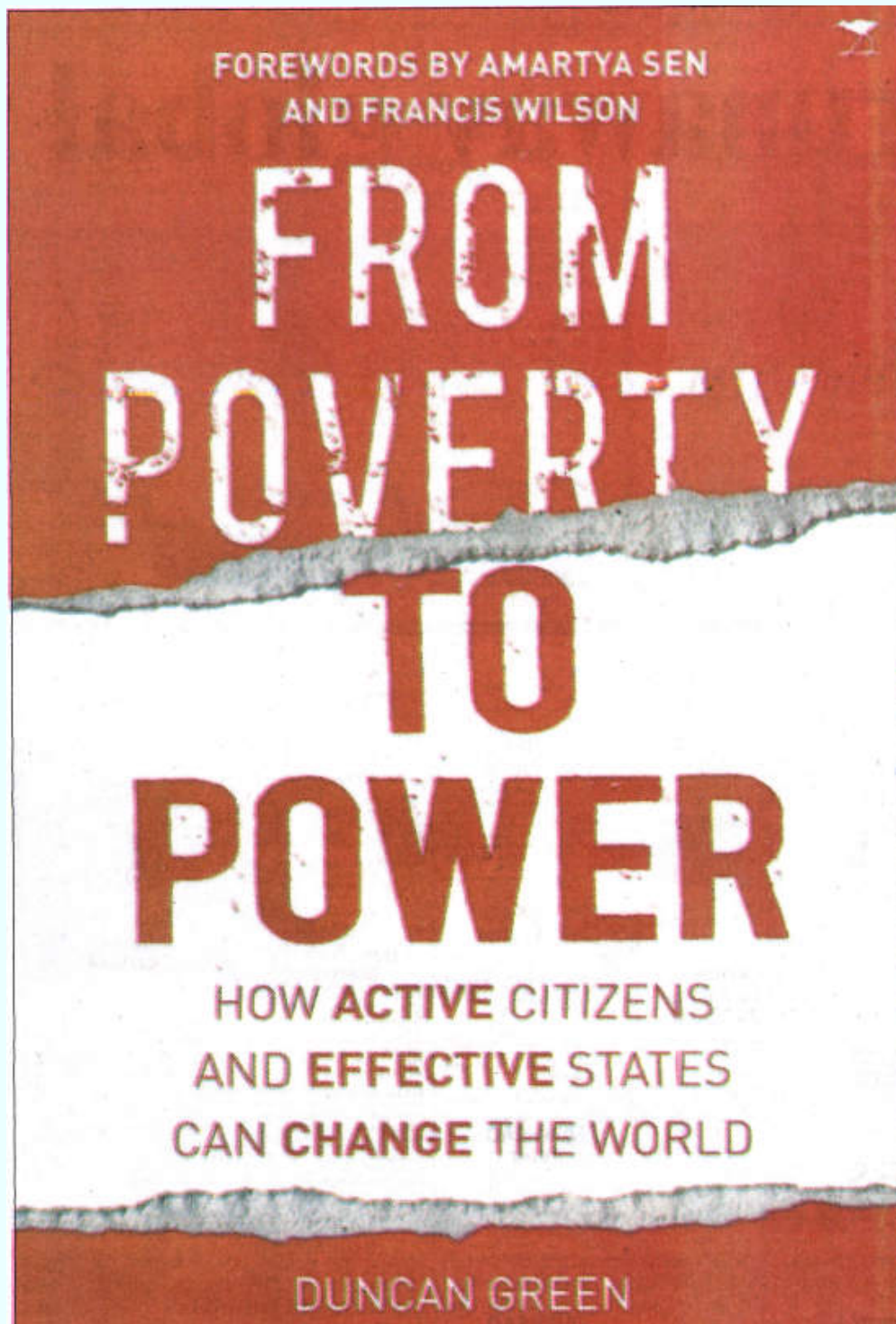
While the barbarity of humankind may be depressing, the book makes us marvel at the creativity and determination of people who have brought about change. Green’s vision in mapping out the big picture is in fine detail.

The bottom line is change happens when citizens take action and states become effective. But even before governments do their duty, ordinary citizens can start turning things around.

Each chapter starts with a cameo story, replete with visual and sensory detail. In each section there are case studies and examples of successful citizen groups and governments. One case study describes how the Chiquitano people of Bolivia, their story told in the film *The Mission*, won legal title to the territory they occupied in just one generation. Another tells the story of South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign pressuring government to change its Aids policy.

The global statistics of inequalities are daunting and the book cites a long list, demonstrating that human life is a “lottery by birth”. But statistics are a launching pad for Green’s reflections and analyses.

There’s a hackneyed saying in NGO circles: “If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him how to fish, you feed him for life.”



Green demonstrates this is an over-simplification of what is required for development. As a village leader in Cambodia asked, for example: “What if the man is a woman, and she already knows how to fish?”

“That woman would like her river left alone by illegal logging companies,” the leader said. “She would prefer her government not to build huge dams with the aid of the Asian Development Bank. She would prefer that the police not violently evict communities to make way for the dam.”

This woman wants her basic rights respected.

The book examines the history of the culture of rights, how power is garnered, how poverty and wealth become entrenched, the risk and vulnerability of poor populations and the history and changes of international trade, financial and aid systems. It closes with “A new deal for a new century”.

The details within these chapters address current and future scenarios regarding everything from living off the land to natural disasters, GM crops, climate change, HIV/Aids, human migration and international trade treaties. In every chapter there

are proposals for change.

There are many lessons from South Africa, one of them Green’s observation that state-funded schooling of a good quality is the single best way of cracking cycles of deprivation between generations. Another lesson is the use of the migration of a country’s citizens to its advantage by, for example, setting up a “return fund”, in which part of the migrants’ pensions or other forms of security are deposited in a fund these citizens only access when they return home.

Yet another lesson is that co-operation of elite groups is

needed. Do the wealthy co-operate with the taxman? Are they willing to invest in their own countries? Do they feel any responsibility for reducing poverty?

And there is no substitute for the state in guaranteeing access to decent health care, education, sanitation and drinking water, although non-government organisations may well be the implementing agents.

Among the thousands of stories of success are how Malaysia transformed itself from an agricultural to a manufacturing nation within three decades due to effective state intervention in agriculture, and how Malawi doubled its maize production, both in the chapter on *Living off the land*.

Green also tells the story of how India guaranteed its rural poor a job for 100 days a year in public works programmes; how Brazil and Botswana provided anti-retroviral drugs for all citizens with full-blown Aids; how South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign wrought changes in this government’s Aids policy.

There are some inaccuracies in this section, which states that an exaggerated 20% of South Africans have HIV. Nevertheless, the thrust of the story is correct and useful.

The book is full of interesting information, much of it hopeful. To highlight two sentences entirely out of context: In recent years, many conflicts have been resolved peacefully. Civic resistance has been the key in driving 50 out of 67 repressive governments out of power in the past three decades and most of these countries managed a lasting transition to elected government, according to information from Freedom House.

Conversely, about 95% of all hard-drug production occurs in countries engulfed by civil war.

Is there enough will to bring about change among ordinary people? In poor countries, including Zimbabwe, Nigeria, India, Vietnam, Indonesia and Iran, surveys show young people are at least as interested in politics as their elders. “In almost every country where Oxfam works, it has seen a seemingly irreversible spread of literacy, activism and elected government,” Green writes.

The story whittles away at the stereotype that African states are doomed to failure or corruption. Botswana has successfully managed its diamond wealth, which might have become the “curse of natural re-

sources”, as were the “blood diamonds” of Sierra Leone, the DRC and Angola. After devastating conflicts, Ghana, Tanzania, Rwanda and Mozambique have rebuilt their economies.

A failed state is not a life sentence. Failed states that have become effective are Malaysia, South Korea, Botswana and Mauritius.

The founder of the British National Health Service, Welsh radical Aneurin Bevan believed that “the purpose of power is giving it away”. But few of the powerful do so. In the end, harnessing power for development requires both public vigilance and institutional checks and balances, including the rule, that are all based on a guarantee of rights.

Green concludes that his book “sets out a vision of women and men in communities everywhere who are equipped with education, enjoying good health, with rights, dignity and voice”, with “effective, accountable states”.

“The alternative – a world of ever-deepening gulfs between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is not only morally repugnant, but unstable and defeating, for the ‘uppers’ (*in Robert Chambers’ terminology*) will spend much of their time fending off the legions of ‘lowers’.

“The 20th century was a breathtaking drama, generating unprecedented bloodshed but also extraordinary progress. In retrospect, however, it missed an unrivalled opportunity to use that progress to end poverty. It is not too late to remedy this, but the environmental constraints imposed by climate change and finite natural resources bring an added urgency.

“It is hard to find a more worthwhile cause.”

As a journalist reporting on the efforts of NGOs across Africa to tackle HIV/Aids, I remember feeling frustrated at learning of hosts of projects whose instigators did not know about others’ efforts, so could not replicate the best ones. This book maps out best practice in bringing about change.

It “could well serve as a bible for all those wanting to think creatively and intelligently about poverty in our time”, writes Francis Wilson, emeritus professor of economics at UCT, in the foreword.

“This book is predicated on the belief that it is not too late, provided that leaders, organisations and individuals act,” she writes. “Starting today.”

● Smetherham is a freelance journalist.

