

Book review: The Kochia Chronicles by Khanjan Mehta

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April 2, 2014

Developing technologies to improve the quality of lives of the poor is a very challenging field. It requires expertise from many disciplines as well as having a deep understanding of the local communities that are being served. University-based service learning, humanitarian engineering, and social entrepreneurship programs have been appearing in many universities. Chapters of organisations supporting projects in developing countries, such as Engineers Without Borders and Engineers For a Sustainable World, have also opened up on many university campuses in the US and other developed countries. Students and professors enthusiastically travel around the world to install water distribution networks, water filters, solar panels, etc. Yet many of these students have very limited preparation as they undertake projects that are often technically straight forward but are rife with complexities related to engaging the communities that are served by these projects.

Many books based on field research have been written on the subject of international development. A sampling of these books includes *The Bottom Billion* (Collier, 2007), *Poor Economics* (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012), *Portfolios of The Poor* (Collins et al, 2009), *The Fortune at The Bottom of The Pyramid* (Prahalad, 2010), *Out of Poverty* (Polak, 2008), *The Business Solution to Poverty* (Polak & Warwick, 2013), *Common Wealth* (Sachs, 2009), and *Dead Aid* (Moyo, 2009). While these books do provide insights and guidance on conducting projects in the developing world, they tend to be written as research monographs focused on the business, economic and/or technical aspects of development solutions. They generally provide little anthropological and cultural insight into the complexities of development projects.

Khanjan Mehta's book, *The Kochia Chronicles*, uses a very different approach. He provides a series of fictional stories set in the town of Kochia in Western Kenya to bring out the subtle cultural aspects of international development projects, including some often unintended consequences of well-intentioned efforts.

The book introduces a number of main characters who live in the town of Kochia. There is the wise, knowledgeable and very creative engineer, Okello, who can solve any technical challenge; Obongo, the young man who is very motivated and enterprising but somewhat naïve in business; Mr Jackson, a very astute and successful fund raiser who is running several orphanages; Sister Phoebe and Rev. Ndienge who represent the Church but often struggle with balancing local needs with the teachings of the Church; and finally, Odhiambo, the town's story teller and another entrepreneur.

Each chapter begins with a puzzle or mystery that unfolds during the course of the chapter and then gets resolved by the chapter's end. For example, at the beginning of chapter 5, The Message for Sister Phoebe, Sister Phoebe sees an image displayed on the screen of her cell phone. She interprets in one way and then as she goes around meeting different members of the Kochia community, each person interprets the image in a different way, depending on their particular view of the world. In the end, a simple explanation of the image is provided by Okello.

Each story is told in an engaging way using local cultural idioms and phrases. Mehta paints a picture of daily life in the community and the struggles that community members face both with respect to serious health problems, such as HIV/AIDS, and the daily financial challenges to make ends meet. He delves into many cultural issues related to these topics such as the conflict between the Church's teachings against using contraceptives versus health workers recommending the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. He presents the ethical issue of professional preachers who make money from vulnerable people, for example, by praying to God to perform miracles or helping students to pass their exams.

Mehta also discusses long-held traditions that can be very financially taxing to individuals. An example of this is the elaborate funeral that is arranged for Obongo's father who dies suddenly in a car accident. Obongo feels pressure to buy a fancy coffin, to hire

a special van to transport the family to the funeral, and to arrange an expensive feast for his community; arrangements that are far beyond his financial capacity resulting in him having to secure a loan to meet this financial obligation.

One of the more insightful chapters that is particularly relevant to students looking to “do good” in developing countries is chapter 6, Mr Jackson’s Secret to Success. Mehta describes in here the “image” that the orphanages need to portray in order to continue to successfully raise funds. He points out that much of the support that is provided is given to younger children because they are cute. However, he also informs us of the dire need for older children to be supported and that support is not always forthcoming for these children. He also describes how two naïve young visitors to one of Mr Jackson’s orphanages write a report on the conditions of the orphanage and send it out to many contacts without first checking with Mr Jackson. After the visitors receive a detailed explanation from Mr Jackson as to the cause of the conditions, they realise their mistake. They write a rebuttal to their original report and send it out to the contacts and request Mr Jackson’s forgiveness.

In telling the stories, Mehta paints a prosaic picture of the multiple dimensions of the village communities. He describes the type of food that the people eat, the types of beverages that they drink, the hierarchical structure of the communities, and the inter-tribal tension that exists between the various tribes in Kenya. Kochia is a community of mostly Luo people and Odhiambo, the local story teller is renowned for blaming any problem that arises in the community on the Kikuyus, another Kenyan tribe. There is a very strong loyalty within different tribes in Kenya and, even today, with more integration of the tribes, especially in the major cities, there is still a lot of discrimination between the tribes, particularly in rural areas.

Mehta also provides excellent insight into the challenges of dealing with the bureaucracies in Kenya. For example, in chapter 8, The Fisherman’s Sweet Fate, the story of the search for Obongo’s brother, a fisherman, who has gone missing is narrated. Officers at the Fisheries department confiscated Obongo’s brother’s fishing nets because the holes were smaller than a particular size and would therefore catch immature fish, not allowing them to grow to a large enough size to reproduce resulting in a shrinking fish population. While the rule is reasonable, the way that it was implemented was unreasonable. The nets were confiscated at short notice and resulted in Obongo’s brother being deprived of his livelihood. The rules/laws in Kenya are mostly based on a sound footing. However, the implementation of these rules/laws is often illogical. Many times this is done to harass individuals with the hope that the person will become frustrated and

try to get around the problem by offering a bribe to the government official. In this way, the officer can enhance his/her income.

Mehta also illustrates the absurdity of deeds by some very well intentioned visitors. For example, he informs the reader that many visitors bring toothbrushes for the children of Mr Jackson’s orphanages. While this is very thoughtful, Mr Jackson becomes overwhelmed with donated toothbrushes and ends up bartering them for other products and services! One visitor was disappointed that there were relatively few trashcans in the dormitories. He insisted that many trashcans be located at regular intervals along the wing of an orphanage. This was a condition he required to be met in order for the orphanage to receive his donation.

As a social entrepreneur, Mehta provides many ideas in this book for entrepreneurial ventures. After observing how much Obongo goes into debt to hold a lavish funeral for his father, Okello wanted to explore a low cost approach to providing funeral services. He developed the cardboard coffin, an idea that was very much supported by Sr. Phoebe because many of the HIV/AIDS patients at her hospice are very poor. Mehta develops and presents a business model for this cardboard coffin business.

Mehta’s book provides a lot of good insights into the cultural aspects of doing social entrepreneurship and service learning projects in Kenya. His writing is engaging and humorous. As a textbook for students preparing to travel overseas to conduct development projects, this book would provide an excellent resource if presented by an experienced instructor who is very familiar with the subtle cultural issues raised by Mehta. One suggestion to enhance the book would be to add discussion questions at the end of each chapter that could be used to lead class discussions in courses.

In summary, Khanjan Mehta’s *The Kochia Chronicles*, is a wonderful book to read. The stories are engaging and insightful. The book is set up to encourage dialogue on the varied issues raised in each chapter. Adding discussion questions at the end of each chapter would make this an excellent textbook for a course on international project development.

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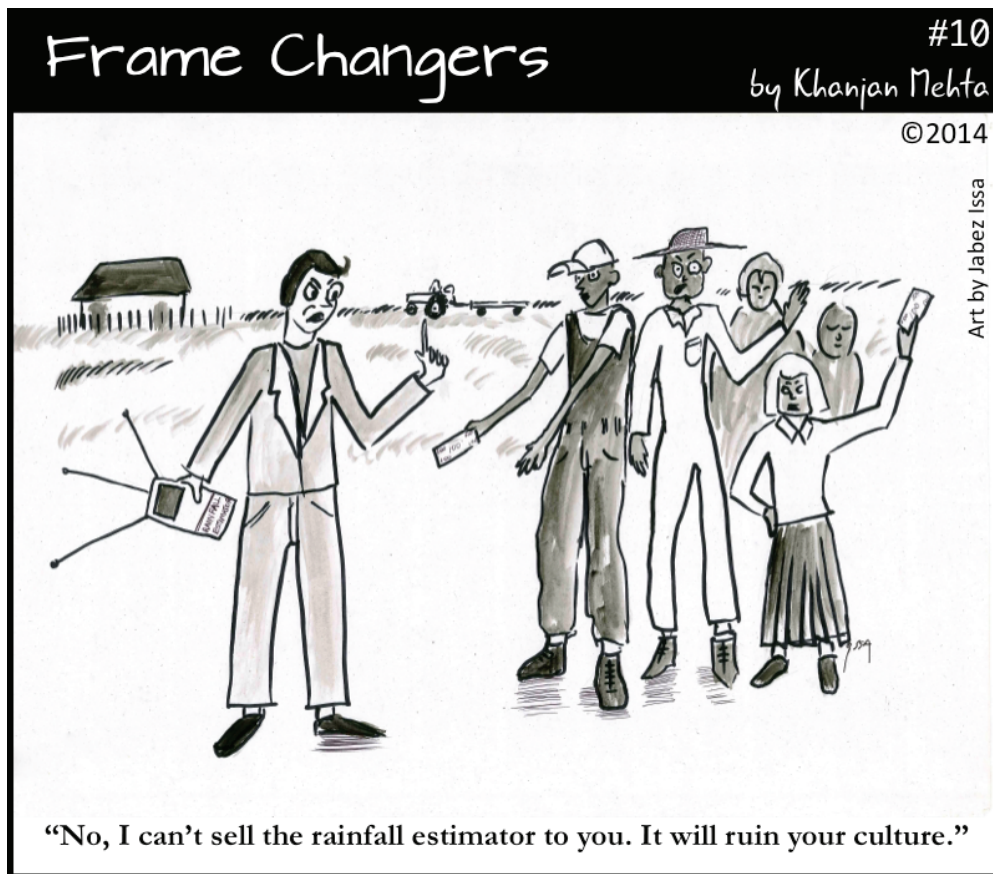
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BOOK LINK

<http://sites.psu.edu/khanjanmehta/the-kochia-chronicles/>

Khanjan Meta also produces a series of cartoons called “Frame Changers” which focuses on sustainable development, humanitarian engineering and social enterprise: <http://sites.psu.edu/khanjanmehta/framechangers/>



(As my dear friend, Duarte Morais, says: Let’s not museumify cultures. Cultures are dynamic; they evolve over time.)