

## Book review:

### *"In the River They Swim: Essays from Around the World on Enterprise Solutions to Poverty"*

by Michael Fairbanks, Malik Fal, Marcela Escobari-Rose and, Elizabeth Hooper.

Isabel Villamor

Among the many books that can be found which try to discover the best solution to the end of poverty we can find the present book. In "In the River They Swim: Essays from Around the World on Enterprise Solutions to Poverty", far from finding solutions for this problem, we discover a set of reflections that stand up for private initiative and technology as the most effective ways to fight poverty.

This commitment of private enterprise and technology does not come from detailed laboratory studies or ideas, but from the reflections of a number of authors who have personally experienced the struggle against poverty. Hence the curious title of this book, which Fairbanks, the author of the book, explains at its introduction:

*"There are many ways to know a river according to the teachings of a Sufi Master. You can know it by studying its maps and documents written about its currents, depth, source, etc. If you're drawn by it you can also choose to travel, see it and study it from a distance close enough so you can see it every now and eventually get your foot in it to feel how cold or warm it is. Until you ultimately decide to take off your clothes and dive into it, only then realizing its true character, its effects on you and whether you are strong enough to swim its length."*

And this is precisely what this book, through a series of essay, is about. The 29 essays that constitute the book are written by remarkable people that have dived into the waters of international development, and whose initiatives and risks taken have been instrumental as the world shifts its thinking about entrepreneurs and the private sector and sees them as main characters in the pursuit of poverty reduction and sustainable development.

All the essays are written by outstanding professionals from diverse sectors, countries and initiatives. These include among others heads of state like President Kagame of Rwanda, multilateral leaders like IADB's President Moreno and practitioners from the enterprise perspective like Robert Henning. As the author remarks:

*"This collection of essays is written by people (...) that learned, the hard way, that in order to be effective as a development worker, one needs to*

*understand not only to apply economics and business strategies, and the art of influencing donors, cabinet ministers and presidents, but also how to listen (to local people experiences)."*

While the structure of this collection seems unclear at times, the ideas presented are powerful and challenging. In addition to this, the book provides the unusual opportunity to read about the impact of the initiatives to fight poverty from the perspective of those who develop or implemented them. The fact that each author bases his or her ideas in what they have experienced, added to their spectacular CVs, guarantees their reflections and convince the reader.

"In the River They Swim: Essays from Around the World on Enterprise Solutions to Poverty", is edited by Michael Fairbanks, Malik Fal, Marcela Escobari-Rose and Elizabeth Hooper. As many will already know, Mr. Fairbanks is a cofounder at both the OTF group (from where he advises heads of state of 20 nations) and the SEVEN Fund, where through grants and special competitions he's promoting entrepreneurship and innovation as the way to fight poverty. His thesis, which somehow is reflected in the different essays of the book, is to encourage people to learn by failing, and doing so "fast, frequently and, most importantly, originally" to end up finding the best innovative solution to problems.

By reading this book, the reader should not expect a series of stories about specific entrepreneurs and organizations serving low income communities. But rather, expect thought-provoking and honest reflections of these leaders as they reconstruct the path they have followed to conceive enterprise as a means to enhance human dignity, as well as their successes, failures and frustrations in doing so. Far from a "how-to" guide to development through enterprise, "In the River They Swim" offers a collection of answers to "why" development through enterprise. As Fairbanks states:

*"These authors demonstrate that eradicating poverty will not be achieved by sentimentality or a generic list of policy measures. The answers, we learn, are to be found in a heretical mix of history, economic theory, business strategy and practice, culture, leadership, and the most precious of human activities, integrative thinking."*