

Development Research: Globalised, Connected and Accountable

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Does development research need reinventing? If it does, why now and in what ways does it need to be changed? These are the questions addressed by the articles in this issue of the *IDS Bulletin*, many of which were presented at IDS40, the fortieth anniversary conference, in September 2006. They were also posed by the 46 Roundtables held throughout the world in 2006, organised by IDS partners and alumni, which preceded and helped frame the conference agenda.

Much is changing in 'development' and in the political context in which we work. International development issues are becoming more global; inequality is rising across a whole host of dimensions – both within and between countries; the capacity to use and generate knowledge is increasing outside the OECD countries; China's emergence is shining a new light on Western assumptions about how development happens; there are new sources of financial capital for development initiatives (the new philanthropic foundations, the emerging countries); information is more easily shared – at least for those with fast internet connections – and is sourced from more places; civil society is forming new transnational alliances to challenge norms and power relations (see **Vera Schattan Coelho**, page 98); the very idea of what sustainable development means is being profoundly questioned in terms of current carbon consumption levels (see **Wolfgang Sachs**, page 36); there is a heightened consciousness in the West about living conditions in other countries; the spheres of influence of the aid donors are shrinking – although their influence within those spheres is increasing; and the boundaries between domestic and international policies are becoming increasingly blurred as national identities are reconfigured and the interdependence of nations intensifies.

But do these changes mean that development research needs to be reinvented? As **John Humphrey**

reminds us (page 14), development research has constantly reinvented itself over the years. Certainly, as **Mike Edwards** notes (page 40), 'business as usual' in development research is financially sustainable given rising aid donor budgets. Yet for many of those involved in the IDS40 activities there was a sense that there is a need for development research to make a conscious decision to change direction. In the West, one's fortieth birthday is known as a watershed year – an ending of one phase of life and a beginning of another. But as several of the Roundtable and conference presenters reminded us, in many other countries the fortieth birthday signals a very different kind of transition as one draws closer to the end of life expectancy. It is natural perhaps therefore to reflect on how much has changed in the world since IDS was founded in 1966 and to characterise the above changes as some kind of fork in the road or threshold for development and therefore for development research.

Taking into account the powerful symbolism of fortieth birthdays, my own participation in (and reading of the reports from all) the Roundtables leads me to conclude that we really have reached a significant place in defining what we want development research to be. The Roundtables told me that there is an increasing convergence of concerns around international development but an increasing divergence of opinion and experience about how to address those concerns underpinned by a context in which the accountability of external development initiatives and development research remains extremely weak.

1 Convergence, divergence and accountability

On convergence, issues such as international migration, the ebb and flow of identities around religion, sexuality, ethnicity and nationhood; climate change and energy use; the conflation of

development and security; and the emergence of China as a global player were heard from all over the world. People are increasingly worried about the same transnational phenomena. Of course, the vastly differing impact of these changes across the world reflects the wide range of abilities to influence and respond to them, increasing inequalities across and between countries. As **José Antonio Ocampo** notes (page 26), nine out of ten people live in countries in which income inequality is increasing. Many of the Roundtables felt that this increasing inequality was unsustainable, particularly from a social cohesion perspective. **Wolfgang Sachs** (page 36) makes the more arresting point that unless outcomes begin to converge – at a level of material wellbeing that is much lower than that enjoyed in the West right now – prosperity will continue to be the preserve of a minority at the expense of a sustainable and *sufficient* prosperity for all. **Barbara Harriss-White** (page 46) also agrees that ‘catch up (with the West) is dead’.

On divergence, it is not so much the current trend of increasing differences in outcome that is striking (that has been an ongoing debate for the last ten years at least), but the realisation that there are many pathways to ‘development’ and that the space to discuss these pathways is opening up once again. As **Adebayo Olukoshi** (page 20) suggests, it is becoming harder and harder to sustain the argument that development is a ‘discussion about the other’ where ‘idealised versions of the history of development in the West’ are used as a metric ‘against which the experiences of the developing countries were measured’. If European development really is exceptional, as **Sachs** argues it is (being based on colonies and carbon), then we do even more violence to the idea of development by using the West as the standard of measurement. The rise of China – sometimes characterised as a unique form of capitalism, sometimes as raw mercantilism – certainly does not conform to this idealised history and makes many Western commentators uncomfortable as a result.

In his article **Hubert Schmitz** (page 51) argues that China’s economic performance forces a reassessment of the broad strands of Western thinking on development which he characterises as: (1) ‘the West is best’ (which he concludes is now discredited); (2) ‘find your own way’ (in his opinion, a bolstered view but problematic for international development agencies); and (3) ‘the West is the problem’ and (4) ‘putting the poor first’, both of which need rethinking in light of China’s economic rise. The

widespread disillusionment that was expressed in the Latin America Roundtables at the inability of the neoliberal recipe to deliver growth was striking and led to calls from the Roundtable participants for governments in the region to neither break with nor submit to globalisation but to create an environment in which development strategies become infused with national values, norms and institutions. As **Ocampo** notes, international frameworks must play a role in creating such policy space, although the likes of Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa will not wait for an invitation.

On accountability, the Roundtables noted that the development industry has much to say about the responsibility of others, but little to say about its own performance in this domain. **Shalmali Guttal** (page 31) noted the development industry’s incredible ability to shrug off failure. **Roy Trivedy** (page 100) would have liked more discussion on what the aid donors could do to improve accountability. **Andy Sumner’s** review article (page 59) concludes that development research has quite successfully ignored ethics, despite dressing itself up in them when it is at its proselytising worst. Perhaps we do not hear much about the ethics of development and development research because we think we have little impact. Indeed, **John Humphrey’s** article (page 14) does a good job of reminding us how three of the major planks of international development – gender equity, environmental stewardship and structural adjustment – arose from research, social movements and policies in the USA and Europe that were essentially domestic in nature. **Nick Benequista** and **Ian Macauslan** (page 86) note that the development research community (including, alas, the IDS40 process) routinely ignores the private sector, another major player not often considered to be within the charmed circle by many in international development. Development initiatives, including research, may or may not have a lot of impact. Frankly we do not know because we don’t spend enough time finding out. If we did, we would be forced to be more reflective about our own positionality as development specialists, especially those of us based in the North.

2 The implications for development research

So, what do these themes of convergence of concerns, divergence of development pathways and weak accountability of development actors mean for development research?

First, we have to acknowledge that, as **Barbara Harriss-White** puts it, development and development research is in a state of flux. Are development and development research increasingly framed by the international aid agenda? If so, this means doing research mainly in Africa and arguably in South Asia. Or is development increasingly framed by positive social change – wherever it occurs? If the former, development studies will become a niche area, with a built-in end-date. If the latter, it begs the question, what is special about development research? As **Adebayo Olukoshi** describes it, the past 40 years have marked the ‘end of the beginning’ for development research. The question is what will the next 40 years mark the beginning of? A waning of development studies as we know it, or a rebirth?

Mike Edwards (page 40) strongly argues for rebirth. He urges the development research community to avoid being bound by the definitions of geography and economics that the aid industry adheres to and to embrace the reality of common but differently experienced patterns of global change. In my overview of the Roundtables (page 1) I argue for a multi-sited perspective on these patterns – for instance, a rounded view on the interactions between China and Africa must include perspectives from China and Africa and cannot be solely reliant on a partial view from Europe or North America. This multi-sited or ‘360-degree’ view of an issue is especially crucial if one believes, as I do, that where one is spatially embedded has an enormous influence on the way one frames an issue, the knowledge one chooses to draw on and the conclusions one comes to. The challenge is to globalise so-called ‘general’ or ‘global knowledge’ by engaging seriously with Southern and Eastern researchers in a way that respects their unique knowledge and perspectives on global issues and also confronts asymmetries in the resources to generate and mobilise knowledge. Capacity development is one of the greatest of these asymmetries – in terms of the ability of those in the South to access, generate, share and promote knowledge from the South. It is an asymmetry that is much talked about and invested in but, as the Roundtables and **Hilary Standing** and **Peter Taylor’s** article note (page 79), little interrogated by the donors or by the development research community.

The implications of the diverging development pathways perspective and the ‘find your own way’ argument laid out by **Hubert Schmitz** (page 51) is the

need to be able to learn across different development stories. If there is more variation across development pathways, let’s make sure we learn across them. **Adebayo Olukoshi** refers to this as a ‘unified development discourse underpinned by solid comparative methods’ and **Mike Edwards** calls them ‘symphonic poems’, which are ‘sufficiently generalised but ‘sufficiently connected to myths and memories, beliefs and ideologies, emotions and aspirations’ – all symptoms of ‘the local’. He cites our neglect of capacity development as an example of an area that needs to be remedied through the creation of new symphonic poems.

So why don’t we see more comparative research on, say, identity politics in Leeds, Lusaka, St Louis and Lahore? Moreover, why don’t we see this research being done by a team of researchers drawn from the UK, Zambia, the USA and Pakistan? Perhaps it is because, as **Standing and Taylor** put it (page 79), development studies is ‘founded on the very dichotomies that it seeks to overcome’. Extant research funding flows, power structures and patterns of credentialism reinforce this dichotomy (**Benequista and Macauslan**). But as Olukoshi notes, ‘problems are not the monopoly of the South and solutions are not the monopoly of the North’. Examples of North–South comparative learning abound: in New York City a variant of the Mexican conditional cash transfer programme, *Oportunidades*, is being introduced; Ségolène Royal, a leader in the French Socialist Party, is championing participatory democracy epitomised by participatory budgeting from Brazil; the UK government is promoting a cash transfer scheme to pregnant mothers so their babies are not born malnourished, a scheme that is common in Central America; and finally, the UK’s Department of Local Government and Communities is looking for ways in which citizens can engage with government, learning from experiences from Brazil, India and Nigeria. It is also interesting to note that Hilary Benn, currently the UK Secretary of State for International Development, gave a seminar in February 2007 to a parliamentary committee on ‘The Challenge of Reducing Poverty: Comparing Developed and Developing Countries’.

Some of this globalised comparative research is already done at IDS and I hope we will soon be doing more. Our experience to date is that such globalised comparative research has made us much

more sensitive to the issues of accountability, to the power differentials between researchers and the researched, and the ability of those researched to hold researchers to account. The fact that we have done this in our own backyard also gives us more legitimacy when we do this work elsewhere.

As I have already argued, external accountability is weak in the development field, whether in policy, practice or research. **Andy Sumner** (page 59) argues that a test of our ethics as researchers is the 'degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it'. But my location in relation to the place I conduct the research is a crucial modifier of **Sumner's** statement. If I conduct a piece of research in the UK that is poorly designed and draws faulty conclusions and is picked up by the media, I will have to deal with embarrassed family, friends and colleagues. If I make a mess of a piece of research in Ghana, the consequences are more localised, further from home and more easily brushed aside. Accountability came up frequently at the conference. It was central to the presentation from Bill Easterly which was drawn from his latest book, *White Man's Burden* and to **Andy Sumner's** article on ethics. Easterly urges us to be aware of the limits of what external actors can do in furthering development and change.

In research that is geared to be shared only inside the academy, peer review offers some partial accountability. But it is for work that is shared with the wider world, and that seeks more directly and deliberately to influence opinion, where accountability is weakest. Should we even be trying to influence public opinion? Edwards argues that we cannot contribute seriously to change unless we do, but he warns about the importance of maintaining rigour and independence while legitimising a wider source of knowledge. **Humphrey** and **Harriss-White** both also stress that theory has to also be strengthened if we are going to challenge short-lived political agendas, wherever they come from (not just from aid donors). **McKeown** would have liked to see more in the conference on the gap between knowing and doing (although there is plenty of discussion of this in the Roundtable reports, see my overview, page 1). **Harriss-White** also lists the dangers of a wide-eyed external focus: donor priorities that shift more rapidly than researchers would like, and researchers allowing the priorities of funders to unduly influence their conclusions.

So, in a world where development is globalised, do we need development research? Moreover, do we need institutes of development research in the North? I would argue that development research can maintain its value-added, only if (a) it embraces comparative work, negotiates multidisciplinary, and acknowledges its normative stance, and (b) it embraces and reconciles multiple perspectives, is not trapped by aid boundaries in terms of geography and theory, allows the location(s) of the research to be determined by the issue being explored, and works on improving its accountability.

The challenge is to globalise our 'general' knowledge on development and to strengthen the capacity to connect general and specific knowledge creation processes. Success in one will reinforce the other.

What about Northern institutes of development research? They will be needed for many reasons, including to co-create '360 degree' research on global issues; to analyse domestic social change thus contributing to comparative analyses; to analyse the international effects of domestic policies and the domestic effects of international policies (see **O'Brien's** note on the Canadian experience, page 95); and to influence powerful actors in the aid community. Do they have to change? As several of the speakers at the IDS40 conference noted, 'business as usual' will not be punitive in a financial sense, at least in the short run.

IDS will certainly not be charting such a static course. The IDS40 process – the Roundtables, the conference and the conversations we had with peers and partners throughout our anniversary year – has influenced us deeply. We will be reflecting on our relationships with the aid industry; about the scope and nature of our comparative work; on how we can facilitate the globalising of 'general' knowledge on development; on how we can help connect general and specific knowledges (see **Nyakoojo's** note, page 93); on the way we work with partners and the partners that we choose to work with; about how we can be held more accountable; about our approach to capacity development and theory development; and about our role as change agents. I don't have the answers for you yet (or for the questions posed by **Roy Trivedy**, page 100) as to what the consequences of these reflections and consultations will be for IDS, but I can assure you that they will not result in business as usual.

Mike Edwards, half jokingly suggested that by 2046 IDS would have to rename itself the Institute for Revolutionary Social Sciences. Whether or not 2046 sees us in that incarnation, our fortieth birthday marked, for us, the end of the beginning

Note

- 1 We are taken to task somewhat by Nick Benequista and Ian Macaulan and by Mary McKeown for our lack of focus on teaching. In my defence, I can only plead that for me it is hard to separate out the functions of

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and the beginning of something new. We hope this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* stimulates you, your networks and your organisation to reflect in the same way.

research and graduate-level teaching. Clearly there are many implications for the content of teaching and the way it is conducted, but it seems to me these stem from the why, what and the how of research.

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None of these agencies stipulated where the Roundtables should be held or the specifics of what they should focus on, which was essential to maintain the spirit of the exercise.