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The status of development and development studies

Proceedings of the 50th anniversary symposium of the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bath.

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Introduction

The symposium brought together past and present staff and students of development studies at the University of Bath to participate in two panel-led sessions: the first on the current state of international development practice and the second on prospects for development studies. This summary includes edited versions of what each panel members said, and of the discussions these triggered. The event was opened by Phil Taylor, the University of Bath's Vice Chancellor, who declared a strong interest in international development issues stemming from his early research into appropriate renewable energy systems for remote areas. He noted that CDS at fifty continues to thrive and grow, delivering research funded from prestigious sources including UKRI, the European Research Council, and Leverhulme Trust. Aurelie Charles, Co-director of CDS, elaborated on current activities of CDS. Ongoing research projects cover humanitarian action and the politics of famine, sustainability of food and critical minerals value chains, China's investment in green development, and business start-ups in South Africa's townships. Teaching also continues to thrive, with around two thousand students now having graduated from Bath with a degree that includes 'development' in its title (see Appendix). She drew particular attention to the value of alumni support for student work placements and doctoral field work through the Bath Research into Development (BRID) Fund.

Geof Wood, a founder member of CDS, and Emeritus Professor of Development Studies at Bath, then gave a short video presentation.

I apologise for not being with you in person today, due to a longstanding date clash. My colleagues have graciously agreed to this recorded welcome from me, since I am the last co-founder of CDS standing! Most of you have worked or studied with us - whether as undergraduates, Master's students, doctoral students, staff or in more than one role. We are immensely proud of you all and of your achievements. We are all part of a wide family, learning together. I am not using this time to recount the evolution of our course at Bath and the history of the Centre since its foundation in 1975. Instead, I want to emphasise that this sustained focus upon international development has never been more important than it is today in our troubled world.

In 1975, 'development studies' in the UK was a post-colonial subject, engaging with the challenges experienced in poor, developing (or under developing) countries as they tried to break free of their colonial legacies. And many of our early students were in the frontline of those challenges as civil servants and NGO staff, with a few destined to become leading politicians. Amid those severe challenges there was an optimism regarding inclusive progress as societies transited towards their versions of modernity from agrarian and pastoral pasts. The focus on poverty alleviation and gender demanded also a focus on the many 'satisfier' preconditions for enriching livelihoods and wellbeing: modern agriculture, industrial manufacturing, infrastructure, education, human capital, governance, administrative competence, planning, wider democracy and participation, and the transition from analogue to

a digital world. You will recognise such themes from your time here, along with our shared realisation that these themes and preconditions occurred within an evolving expansion of global capitalism, entailing a continuation of asymmetries between nations.

The question now, 50 years on, is whether any of that optimism has been realised. There has been progress for many families, and there has been change across those satisfiers. But - and this 'but' is a strong one - over the years, global leaders and elites have coined many slogans to capture aspirations amid continuing disappointments: such as MDGs, SDGs and now 'leaving no-one behind', a very suspicious phrase for me. Somehow it conveys a Pareto optimum discourse in which the ambitions of equality and equity have been abandoned for the acceptance of differential progress spread across different classes, ethnicities, gender and global locations as a function of 'trickle down' capitalist growth. It avoids the core challenge of redistributing life chances as the test of fairness and justice for all. It seems to be an acceptance of second-best development for all, and a disguise of failure. This is why I have tried instead to promote the idea of 'sharing the well' in various publications—but we are a long way from that.

In the meantime, our present post, post-colonial era is throwing up many new problems, tensions and conflicts which unfortunately are revealing the venality and hollowness of elite constructed slogans. We can all contribute so many contemporary examples which are denying that earlier optimism. The world is again significantly at war, and seemingly at war also with itself—climate deterioration being the most obvious example where the internal contradictions of unregulated capitalism in an epoch of dirty technology are now haunting us. Those seeking the magic of technological leap frogging are again trying to avoid hard human choices about fairness and justice as the scarce resources of ingenuity and materiality are hijacked and socially concentrated. The advance of artificial intelligence (AI) is the most recent exposure of internal contradictions, a two-edged sword, with the potential for perverse social outcomes, including the loss of work-related incomes as the basis of livelihoods consumption and the loss of personal independence as our data is captured to manipulate us. These two examples (climate change and AI), with others nested within them (water, for example), underpin present global tensions as in the race for rare earth and other post-oil, post-carbon resources.
But who would have guessed that, with these contradictions, genocide could return; that fascism is round the corner in many countries; that democracy is being openly questioned as inconsistent with material progress; that inequality worsens as wealth is becoming even more concentrated in fewer hands; that conflict and alienation is rife; that policy is increasingly bought by those beneficiaries of what Varoufakis calls 'Techno Feudalism' (or the slow death of capitalism as we knew it) and with it, the loss of liberties? No wonder the peoples of the world are on the move, seeking escape from precarious conditions and taking huge risks in doing so. These levels of risk taking tell us that something very deep is occurring. The global poor and dispossessed are knocking at the door of the presently relatively secure and affluent.

Never before has international development been a topic worthy of such exceptional study. The threatened world needs our family of alumni, and it needs the continuity of that study—students of the future. The world needs 'All such hands to the pump'! On a personal note, it has become clear that retirement and disengagement is not an option. Instead, a duty to use one's pension to best effect for future generations in these troubled times. Our common wealth and wellbeing demands constant vigilance. I hope you have an intriguing, thought provoking day and that this 'family' gathering enriches our spirit for confronting these challenges.

Session 1 – The state of international development practice

International development as a sector or 'regime' is changing fast. In this session four alumni drew on their own experience to reflect on this. They were Charlotte Harland Scott, Sam Nadel, Judith Randel and Robin Guy. The session was chaired by Asha Amirali, CDS postdoctoral fellow, whose work currently focuses on the politics of energy transition in Pakistan, particularly the private solar boom. She commented that the current era is one of profound turbulence, perhaps more than ever before, but also recalled that two decades ago development was described to her as a 'zombie category' —neither fully alive nor entirely obsolete—due to its failure to meet expectations and its inability to grapple with the speed and complexities of global change.

Charlotte Harland Scott is the founder and CEO of Mafisa, an NGO that supports sustainable livelihoods in Western Province of Zambia. She completed her PhD with CDS, supervised by Allister McGregor, in 2008. She has lived in Zambia for over 35 years, working in government, non-government and UN agencies, including a short period as first lady to the President.

I think the most useful perspective I can offer is from how things look right now in Zambia. I wouldn't presume to speak for all of Africa, but from where I sit, change has indeed been thick and fast. Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war we've seen rapid shifts in policy, commodity price turbulence, and declining international support. And these shifts have had real consequences. USAID cuts recently resulted in 16,000 Zambians losing their jobs, and another 3,500 health workers laid off. That's not just numbers — it's families, schools, shops, rents.

And when these shocks hit, new players show up. China's presence is huge — and while there's scepticism, it's changed our infrastructure and industries. Russia's influence is newer, quieter, but it's there. So, what do you do when you're in a remote corner of the country, trying to help people whose situation hasn't changed much since the 1980s? In many places, there's still no phone signal. Some areas have improved — the one I studied for my PhD has phone coverage now — but most haven't.

We didn't set out to work with carbon credits. We just wanted to do community development. But that's where the money was, so we adapted. And yes, there are valid criticisms of carbon finance, but it's helped. Through planned grazing, we've reduced animal deaths by 40%. That's huge in a mainly livestock rearing area. The key is not just finding new funding taps — it's about using what's available to build something sustainable, something community-led. We've leaned on tools from the development sector, but the difference is in expectations. You can't rush in and expect change in three years - by month twenty, people don't even know you yet. Trust takes time.

We've found strength in Zambia's traditional leadership. It might look authoritarian — people kneeling for the chief — but it's based on consent. When power is abused, that consent quietly withdraws. And when it works well, it's a powerful protection against exploitation — against outsiders trying to grab land, resources, labour. So, we've used 'funny money' — carbon finance — to support communities in finding their own solutions. We didn't plan to work on livestock, but by sticking around and listening, that's where the need was. And once people realise no one was coming to fix things for them, they start to act. They plan grazing, earn carbon credits, and decide how to spend the money — like on veterinary services.

What we're seeing is not just necessity, but opportunity. Development built by people themselves, in their own circumstances. Not waiting for donors. We don't do the "hooray, the

donors are here" thing. We rarely let funders visit — it's too disruptive. Instead, we talk, share information, and support locally driven change.

Right now, I feel like we're in a bit of a bubble. As a nation, we're facing the same troubles as everyone else. Whether the politics are going in the right direction is another question. But for now, these are my thoughts. Thank you.

Sam Nadel has been Director of the Social Change Lab since 2024 and is a doctoral student at the LSE. He completed the MSc in Humanitarianism, Conflict and Development with CDS in 2021, and has been a visiting research fellow since 2022. Between 2018 and 2023 he was advocacy adviser, then head of government relations and head of policy and advocacy for Oxfam Great Britain.

What I want to talk about today is NGOs—particularly large northern NGOs. You know, those stuffy old institutions. And really, the question is: what's to be done about them? If we're thinking about the future of international development and trying to find some ways forward, finding ways to reform NGOs will be an important part of that process. While there's clearly no silver bullet, I do want to offer one model—one source of inspiration—that we might take from the environmental sector, where I've spent some time over the past few years.

I won't go in depth into the critiques of NGOs—many of you know them only too well, have written extensively about them. But if we were to summarise the main critiques, I think there are two big ones. First, NGOs have become far too close to money. Their dependence on institutional funding—whether from foreign aid, governments, or large donors—has led to a kind of co-option. They've become beholden to their funders. Second, and relatedly, their relationship to power is compromised. Because they're raising money from states and donors, they have succumb to de-radicalisation and become overly focused on service delivery, efficiency, and management.

Here's something we all know but don't talk about enough: development NGOs have a peculiar dual mandate. They're doing two things that are often mutually incompatible. On one hand, they deliver vital humanitarian support—water, sanitation, education. On the other, they're supposed to be engines for social justice. That's a strange combination. I remember my time at Oxfam. We'd go into government departments and say, "You've got blood on your hands—you're selling arms to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen." And then, in the same breath, one of my colleagues would be asking that same department for funding. That contradiction was never really discussed internally, but it's bizarre.

So, what can we learn from the environmental sector? I think organisations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth offer some useful lessons. These are long-established institutions, but they did something fundamentally different from the start. In the late 60s and early 70s, they chose not to accept money from governments or private companies. They've taken bits here and there, but primarily they rely on donations from private individuals and foundations.

They also set up clever legal structures. Both Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth operate as dual entities: a charitable foundation that raises money, and a limited company that does the campaigning. That structure frees them to say things they couldn't as charities. They're not bound by charitable objects in the same way. At Oxfam, whenever we thought we might get into trouble, we'd have to go back to our charitable objects and ask, "Does this align?" Our mandate was broad—prevent and relieve poverty, protect the vulnerable, promote human rights—but even then, when we started working on economic inequality, we worried someone might

complain to the Charity Commission. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth said, "We're going to create a limited company and give ourselves more freedom to campaign on what we care about." That's a structural difference worth exploring.

Friends of the Earth also has a uniquely participatory structure. It has hundreds of thousands of members and local groups across the country. Some of those members have even sat on the board. Greenpeace is more top-down, but it's interesting to see that kind of grassroots involvement.

What's the upshot? I'd argue that Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have been more innovative and more willing to push political boundaries. Greenpeace engages in direct action—occupying oil rigs, disrupting AGMs and party conferences. Their co-director was recently arrested for a protest outside the US embassy over Gaza. Greenpeace also intentionally breached the Lobbying Act, knowing they'd be fined, to protest what they saw as an unjust law. You wouldn't see that kind of thing from development NGOs. Friends of the Earth is less about direct action but has been active in strategic litigation, winning some seismic court cases recently.

Now, I don't want to oversell it. These organisations have faced their fair share of critiques. Extinction Rebellion, for example, staged a sit-in at Greenpeace's office, arguing they weren't being adequately radical and had been co-opted by the state. And of course, there's a spectrum. Not all directors of environmental NGOs are out getting arrested. WWF, RSPB — they're still taking funding from states and private companies and have been less willing to voice critiques publicly.

As a thought experiment, what if one of the big international development NGOs dealt with the dual mandate problem by splitting in two? One organisation focused solely on humanitarian aid and development support—maybe just channelling money to local groups. And another that practises what it preaches on social justice, doesn't take institutional or corporate funding, and exists to challenge power. They'd be much smaller organisations. Save the Children, for example, raised £300 million last year—ten times the size of Greenpeace. That's what institutional funding gets you: weight, size, power. So, the question is: are these organisations willing to compromise and be smaller and leaner in exchange for independence, in exchange for being able to 'speak truth to power' in the way they say they want to? Maybe that's one practical way NGOs can begin to address the critiques they face.

Judith Randel is co-director of Ideas and Action for the Public Good with Tony German, with whom she also co-founded Development Initiatives. She completed an MSc in Development Studies in 1982 and is currently a CDS visiting fellow.

What would I have thought when I graduated 44 years ago about the development world as it is now, and the aid regime we're still working within? Honestly, I don't think I would have expected the old regime to last this long. I would have hoped it would have modernised, evolved, and moved beyond the 20th-century conception it's been stuck in since my student days. Twenty years ago, Inge Kaul at UNDP was pushing the agenda of global public goods—arguing that aid needed to transform into a mechanism for international cooperation based on shared values and shared problems. But what's happened since? We've had decades of discussion—the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, Financing for Development summits, including the recent one in Seville—and yet global public goods barely feature. There's little serious political engagement with how international cooperation should be

financed and managed. In many areas—beyond humanitarian response—we're simply not addressing how the world works together.

One of the questions posed to this panel was how the development sector responds to this moment. And it's a sharp moment. Even things written two years ago feel dated. So, we need to ask: is this just a temporary phase, or is this the environment we'll be working in for the next decade? For those of us paid to think and communicate about these issues, there are hard questions. How do we inform and drive leadership on international cooperation? Back in 1982, I would have assumed we'd be talking about international cooperation, not aid. Yet aid remains the dominant framework.

Looking back to the 1990s, we had big, contested conferences—the UN Conference on Environment and Development, the Population and Development Conference, the Beijing Women's Conference, Education for All. These were spaces for real debate, philosophical disagreement, even anger. I miss that energy. Compare that to the recent Financing for Development conference in Spain. The communique was agreed two weeks before the event. The energy has been drained from these discussions. The word 'co-option' came up earlier—Tony German and I wrote a book in the '90s on NGO-government relations, and even then, the question was whether NGOs were being co-opted as a result of official funding. The answer today seems to me to be clearly yes. Interestingly, when Oxfam lost some of its official funding, it found its voice again. The consensus that's developed over the last 20–30 years has, I think, been enervating for the sector. So, what do we do?

First, we need to focus on the big issues—the economic and political fundamentals. We can't expect the market or the media to do that. This is where public intellectuals must step up. Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland, often speaks powerfully on this. This is one of the things he said at the Dochas 50th anniversary conference in Dublin in 2024:

"How much of the academic world, settled into their micro studies, avoided the macro studies, were afraid they might be called Marxist? In the USA you could lose your tenure. And what do you end up with - a plethora of micro studies. Tings that advance individuation. Your career – you'll get published, you'll make the index and so forth, but all the other fundamental work is still important."

That's a challenge to all of us. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are universal in scope, but we need to go further—toward solidarity. Where are the opportunities for solidarity with the global South? Take credit rating agencies: finance ministers across Africa are deeply frustrated by their unaccountable power. And here in the UK, many individuals feel similarly about financial institutions. That's a shared issue—an opportunity for solidarity.

We also need a renewed sense of possibility. Geof asked whether we still have optimism. Probably not. People are worn down. But we must still believe in the possibility of change. Look at social protection. In the early '90s, it was seen as unaffordable and unrealistic for poor countries. The World Bank's 'Averting the Old Age Crisis' dismissed the idea. But thanks in part to researchers and NGOs, social protection is now mainstream. The Chronic Poverty Research Centre even targeted its early work at one person—Clare Short—because she didn't believe welfare was the right path. They reframed social protection as empowerment, and the landscape changed. That's the kind of strategic thinking we need. But we also need to stop avoiding the hard issues. At the Nutrition for Growth summit in France this year, there was little talk about agribusiness. How can you talk about nutrition without addressing the role of agribusiness? We need to be relevant. And that means facing uncomfortable truths.

Let me end with a few final thoughts. Over the last 40 years, we've seen an explosion of policy analysis—largely driven by the growth of development studies. Everyone wants to be a policy worker. But this has led to a flood of repetitive work, often exchanged among the same people. In a study on humanitarian evidence use in East Africa, we asked people what they'd read recently that was useful. Most cited something written by their own organisation. My colleague Karen Rono summed it up perfectly: "more is written than read." That's a sobering thought. As universities train the next generation of public intellectuals, we need to think hard about that.

When development was introduced into the UK national curriculum, I believe it raised awareness and knowledge and laid the foundation for the Make Poverty History movement. A whole generation of kids grew up learning about development—and they acted. So, we have a responsibility to think about the students coming through now. What will they think? How will they respond to the world? We need to rethink how we use our energy to address the world as it is. Thank you for listening. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Robin Guy in Head of programme for the Climate Finance Accelerator in the UK Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. He graduated from Bath with a BSc in International Development with Economics in 2019.

I was quite surprised to be asked to speak here today. I even wrote back to James Copestake, politely asking if he was sure he wanted me? He said he did, but I'm hoping he's not silently regretting it and wondering if he invited the wrong Robin. Six years ago, I left Bath University when the outlook for international development seemed more positive. Even during Trump's first term, the US was still spending around $30 billion a year in ODA. All major UK political parties had committed to the 0.7% target in the 2019 election. And people still talked about keeping global temperature rise within 1.5°C with at least some hope. The outlook is very different today. I've read a lot of articles asking whether aid is dead. I don't think it is, and I don't think international development is either. But it's definitely a very different world, even while the need remains and grows. I'm going to focus my remarks on climate—and specifically international climate finance—because that's the field I've worked in for the past four or five years. I want to share five areas where I think change is needed in this space, with varying levels of expectation about whether that change will happen.

<u>1. What will happen: broadening the tent</u>
I'm confident this will happen. We're going to see a continued—and necessary—expansion of the range of actors involved in international development. And yes, that includes working with people and institutions whose values don't always align with ours. While it's comforting to take a hard stance on issues and we do need to keep our red lines, it's not practical not to engage with everyone we disagree with. We need more friends and partners in this space. In my field, that means engaging with big private financial institutions. These institutions typically have different motives and requirements than us in the development tent. Profit is, literally, their bottom line. And from a development perspective, the impact of these institutions' activities raises concerns, including around inequality. That's not at the top of their agenda. But we can't afford to ignore them. The climate financing gap is in the trillions. Public funding is maxed out. So, where's the money coming from? It's coming from them. The misalignment in motives results in actions we will disagree with. But if we stop engaging with them when we disagree, we lose them. And despite the misalignment, there's promising movement: globally, private climate finance has trebled in the past five years. At New York Climate Week last year, it was said that we need to create FOMO—fear of missing out—for these investors. We need to show them the opportunities available, even if we're not all motivated by the same things.

2. What could happen: shifting the power dynamic

This needs to happen—but I'm less hopeful. We need to stop letting the West dominate the narrative. We need far more local voices in the room—and not just in the room but heard. At the Finance in Common summit in Cape Town this year, you could walk from one room to another and hear completely different takes on the same issue. One room: "We need to mobilise more finance for emerging markets." Next room: "We need cheaper finance, debt relief, credit rating reform." The difference? Who was speaking. Only 7% of climate finance in ODA-eligible countries goes to adaptation, yet that's frequently highlighted as the greatest need by those countries. That mismatch illustrates the challenge. We may not be able to fill the financial gap that has been left by spending cuts, but we should start filling the 'voice gap' that has come from those same actors in various fora.

3. What I hope will happen: boldness and creativity

We need to be bolder. More creative. More willing to change. In my final year at Bath, James asked our class, "Who thinks the UK will have universal basic income in the next 20 years?" He was the only one who raised his hand. Maybe we were just shy, but it shows how fringe ideas can become increasingly mainstream. Take the Loss and Damage Fund—once niche, now central to recent COPs. We need to be more willing to consider and embrace these fringe ideas. In the book 'Five Times Faster', Simon Sharpe argues we should focus our efforts on positive tipping points—critical interventions with systemic impact. That means more targeted interventions and being willing to cut things that don't work. That's risky, especially at a public level, but it's necessary.

4. What must happen: efficiency and effectiveness

We need to be more efficient and more effective. It's a bit of a cheap line, but it's true. Anyone who's worked in the sector knows it. We need better coordination—within and between donors. I dread to think how much we've paid for effectively the same reports multiple times. And there are far too many instances of programmes doing nearly the same thing that aren't talking to each other to co-ordinate efforts. A 2023 report found that MDBs' climate finance commitments had a mobilisation rate of 0.3 to 1. With the climate finance gap the scale it is, we need to do better. And we need to be faster. The Green Climate Fund is the biggest climate fund in the world but deploying funding takes an age and is too complex. Big initiatives are great, but if they're not functional, they're no use. We need to be able to respond to current needs, not past ones.

5. What should happen: better communication

I'm not a comms expert, but I know we need to communicate better. Effective communication doesn't need to be complex. We need to move away from platitudes and inaccessible academic language. We need messaging that makes sense to people outside of the sector. That means getting across the scale of the challenge but also the positive stories of what's already being achieved. Constantly focusing on the climate crisis isn't motivating people anymore. Showing practical progress can. Six years ago, I had a very different perspective. Maybe in another six years I'll have a different perspective again - hopefully a perkier one.

Session 1 discussion

Tony German asked whether organisations like Oxfam should consider transforming into political parties. He backed up this question by observing that scale of public support for NGOs—measured in direct debits and donations—often exceeds that of political parties. He also questioned whether the charity model, rooted in 19th-century constructs, remains fit for purpose in addressing today's political and structural challenges. Others responded by

highlighting the financial and institutional inertia that prevents such a transformation. The development "industrial complex" is deeply embedded and difficult to disrupt. Extinction Rebellion founder Roger Hallam's attempt to launch a political party, and the mixed public expectations of organisations like Oxfam and Greenpeace, illustrate the tensions between humanitarian and political mandates. An alternative strategy pursued by many former staff of NGOs has been to shift into mainstream politics and become members of Parliament.

Max Nino-Zarazua raised the issue of redirection of development aid towards security and defence - through integration by blurring of the boundary between them, and through straightforward budgetary reallocation. Others were critical of the damage wrought by radical cuts – e.g. to USAID - informed by crude metrics and algorithms. Efficiency drives often create bureaucratic obstacles to change and raised compliance costs more than they deliver meaningful savings.

Virginia Williamson, challenged the panel's use of the pronoun 'we' in development discourse, asking whether it referred to British to the international development 'community', and warning against understating differences in the values, culture and modalities of different donors. Others, responded by emphasising the strength of peer norms and rules across donor institutions, reinforced by multilateral agencies, including the OECD's Development Assistance Committee.

Sarah White reflected on the erosion of the rules-based international order, noting the collapse of the UN's authority and the impunity of powerful actors in the war in Gaza. She questioned whether development studies can still operate within a framework that assumes shared principles and institutions. Jason Hart echoed this concern, highlighting complicity in genocide and the implications for development's moral authority. He also queried whether University development studies programmes should continue to educate predominantly Western students if the goal is to amplify voices from the Global South.

Muhamad Faisal Sharif questioned the effectiveness of climate finance, sharing experiences from Pakistan where ambitious renewable energy targets have been met without international support. He asked whether climate finance mechanisms are truly delivering for the Global South or reinforcing existing inequalities and injustice. Others expressed scepticism about the performative nature of global climate events like COP, and how they marginalise the voices of those most affected. Charlotte Harland Scott agreed with criticism of the climate finance sector, describing it as opaque and exclusionary. Drawing on her experience in Zambia she also called out the dishonesty of visitors who blamed local actors for climate change and denied them access to resources and information. This spoke to continued deficits in aid transparency, ethics, and accountability. Robin Guy responding by emphasising the importance of demand-led models like the NDC (Nationally Determined Contribution) Partnerships, which respond to requests from governments rather than imposing donor-driven agendas. In response to Jason Hart's questions about recruitment of mostly Western students onto development programmes he noted that most of his peers did not pursue careers as development practitioners or policy makers but nevertheless gained insights and skills useful to them in other fields.

Allister McGregor reflected on the concept of 'displacement' in development policy, arguing that the sector has lost its sense of direction. He called for radical reform and proposed renaming the Centre for Development Studies the 'Centre for Development Solidarity,' to better reflect a commitment to shared human well-being.

David Lewis picked up on Sam Nadel's discussion of the dual mandates faced by NGOs—between doing and campaigning, development and humanitarian work, global versus local engagement. He questioned how far the legitimacy argument derived from combining operational and advocacy work still holds.

Jean Boulton raised concerns about the prioritisation of economic pragmatism over values, particularly in relation to arms sales and climate finance. She warned against allowing financial institutions to dominate development agendas and stressed the importance of participatory approaches and recognising that tipping points mostly emerge from grassroots activity, rather than by concentrating resources on a few priority actions.

The session concluded with reflections on the shrinking constituency for international development. Sam Nadel noted that people increasingly support causes and movements rather than organisations, and that NGOs must adapt to this shift. He also defended the role of NGOs in shaping public narratives, citing as an example how Oxfam's annual inequality campaign puts the spotlight on extreme well and inequality during Davos. Judith Randel reminded the group that the development sector itself is a resource—of time, energy, and relationships—and urged a more serious consideration of how that resource is used, including how far development teaching aligns with contemporary needs.

Session 2 - Prospects for development studies

The second session turned to how the scholarly study of global development is evolving. The panel members were Ben Radley (Bath), Severine Deneulin (Oxford), and David Lewis (LSE). The session was chaired by Mihika Chatterjee, co-director of CDS, and a lecturer in international development at Bath since 2022. Having trained as an economist and in development studies, she described how the latter enabled her to adopt a broader approach to the study of late industrialisation and social transformation, particularly land and labour struggles in South Asia. She recalled how this year's conference of the UK Development Studies Association (DSA), hosted in Bath by CDS, included a plenary session on the relationship between development economics and development studies. The chair of that session (James Copestake) introduced the term *schismogenesis* to describe the cultural causal mechanism through which related disciplines become defined in part by contrasting and differentiating themselves from each other. In this session, she hoped we could also explore the term *ecumenism* as a counterpoint: that we do not paper over differences and competing epistemologies and world views in the politics of knowledge production – the danger of a naive ecumenism being that it reinforces the dominance of certain disciplines and ways of thinking. Mihika also referred to debate over the geographical focus of development studies, reignited by a 2019 special issue of *Development and Change* that questioned whether the field should continue to focus primarily on the Global South or expand to include the Global North. Despite narratives of convergence—such as economic growth in the South and rising poverty in the North—events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the genocide in Gaza have, she suggested, reaffirmed the relevance of a global 'North–South' divide. Development studies must remain grounded in questions of power and practice. While recognising suffering and inequality globally, she argued that the field's analytical foundations—colonialism, imperialism, and uneven development—remain essential for understanding contemporary global injustices.

Ben Radley is Reader in International Development at Bath, where he has worked since 2020, having previously lived and worked for several years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and obtained his PhD from the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague. He was a coauthor of "Common challenges for all? A critical engagement with the emerging vision for post-pandemic development studies" published in *Development and Change* in 2023.

I want to pick up on the debate Mihika introduced—the shift in development studies from 'international' development, focused on the global South, to 'global' development, which aims to encompass both South and North. It's a debate that's gained traction in the last five years and has become increasingly influential in shaping the direction of the discipline. I'll admit, I was hesitant to dive into this topic. It can feel a bit arcane—even for those of us working in development studies. But I do think it touches on some fundamental questions about where the field is heading.

So, what are the core premises behind this shift to 'global' development? I see three main ones. The first draws from post-development thinking and the Truman origin story of development. In this view, development is something imposed by the North on the South—through aid, discourse, and power. It's a tool of control, a colonial legacy. Proponents of 'global' development argue that we need to move beyond this troubled past. It's framed as part of a decolonial turn—an effort to decentre the "white gaze" of development, as Robtel Neajai Pailey memorably put it in her keynote at the 2019 DSA conference. This shift is about opening the field up to address universal concerns.

The second premise is what's called 'converging divergence.' It's a slippery concept, but the idea is that over the past 50 years, countries in the North and South have converged on many human and economic development indicators. At the same time, inequality within countries has diverged—especially in the North. So, the argument goes, the old North–South binary no longer holds. Poverty and inequality exist everywhere. Wealth exists everywhere. Development studies should reflect that. To me, this sounds a bit like the elite slogans we hear during global crises that "we're all in this together", "we're all in the same boat." It flattens the differences and risks obscuring the structural hierarchies that still shape the global order.

The third premise is more methodological. It's about introducing new conceptual lenses—complexity, unruliness, risk, fragility. These are seen as better suited to a post-pandemic world and a development studies fit for the 21st century.

If you're comfortable with these three premises, you might be on board with the shift to global development. But I want to push back on each of them. Let's start with the first premise—the Truman story. I think it's too narrow. Development studies, as I understand it, is not just a global North imposition. It has contested origins, with roots in the South as well. Thandika Mkandawire, the late Malawian economist, offered a counter-narrative—the Bandung story. The 1955 Bandung Conference brought together leaders from newly independent countries in Asia and Africa. It framed development as emancipation, as a struggle for liberation from colonial and imperial domination. This is a very different story—development as freedom, not control. And while it's true that some indicators show convergence between North and South, I think the deeper structures of subordination remain. In some cases, they've even intensified.

To illustrate this, let's take a quick journey through early development economics—specifically the work of Raúl Prebisch and his centre–periphery framework. Prebisch was pushing back against the universalist economics of his time—both neoclassical and Keynesian. In a brilliant footnote from his 1950 paper, he wrote that the biggest flaw in general economic theory was its "false sense of universality." He argued that the dynamics of growth in the North and South are fundamentally different. In the North, growth is driven by domestic investment and consumption—things that can be managed through national policy. That's why, after the 2008 financial crisis or during the pandemic, northern countries could use fiscal and monetary tools to respond. In the South, growth is driven by exports—especially of primary commodities. These are much harder to control through domestic policy. They're shaped by global markets, external demand, and price volatility. So Prebisch called for a different economic theory—one that recognised the structural constraints of the South. This gave rise to development studies as a distinct field, focused on structural transformation, industrialisation, agrarian change, and urbanisation.

These concerns were largely absent from mainstream economics, but they were central to development studies. And they're still relevant. The latest UNCTAD report shows that two-thirds of low- and middle-income countries remain commodity dependent. In the countries I work in, national development strategies still prioritise structural transformation and industrialisation. So yes, things have changed. But I think it's premature to flatten the global hierarchy and adopt a universal framework that sidelines these core concerns.

What worries me is that the papers promoting 'global' development seem to jettison the old toolkit—structural transformation, dependency theory, and the rest. If students today are trained only in this new framework, they'll get a very different—and, I think, incomplete—understanding of development. Finally, I think we need to acknowledge the politics behind this shift. The strongest proponents of global development are based at IDS (Sussex) and Global

Development Institute (Manchester)—two institutions heavily reliant on FCDO and other UK government funding. It's hard to ignore the possibility that this is, at least in part, a repositioning exercise—an attempt to align with domestic political priorities and funding streams. So that's why I feel uncomfortable with the direction of travel. It's where the discipline seems to be heading, but I find myself increasingly at odds with it.

Severine Deneulin is Director of International Development at the Laudato Si' Research Institute and an associate fellow at the University of Oxford Department of International Development. She was a lecturer in International Development at Bath from 2005 (exactly twenty years ago) to 2021.

Mihika asked me to share some reflections on the future of development studies. Of course, no one can predict the future with certainty. But I believe the present is in our hands—though some might challenge even that notion. What I want to offer today are thoughts grounded in two areas of development studies that I was fortunate to explore during my time at the University of Bath. These areas have shaped me both personally and professionally, and I believe they offer clues about where development studies might be heading. I will start with human development and the capability approach, then move on to religion and development.

<u>Human development and the capability approach</u>
Most of us here will be familiar with the Human Development Reports from UNDP, and Amartya Sen's capability approach. These frameworks emerged as critiques of GDP and utility-based measures of well-being. Sen's book 'Development as Freedom' challenged the reduction of human well-being to mere economic transmission or utility. Development, at its core, is about people—about human flourishing and improving lives. This focus on well-being is what drew me to Bath, particularly its research into wellbeing in developing countries. But in recent years, the UNDP has begun to ask deeper questions: What does it mean to be human? What is human development in the context of our planet?

We are one species—Homo Sapiens—living among millions of others. Our lives are deeply interconnected with plants, animals, fungi, and ecosystems. Thinkers like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Achille Mbembe have urged us to shift from a global perspective to a planetary one. Human history is also natural history. We exist because of the ecosystems that sustain us. And as natural history collapses, so too does human history. So, how do we bring nature and the non-human world into development studies? Climate change has shown us that human activity now shapes natural history. Indigenous peoples in Latin America remind us: we are water, we are air, we are rivers, we are forests. This interconnectedness must be central to our thinking. In Oxford University's Department of National Development, where I teach, I've introduced a course on valuing nature—exploring ethical frameworks and policy implications. We need to integrate social and environmental ethics, and even philosophical and theological anthropology, into our understanding of what it means to be human.

Development studies, as a transdisciplinary field concerned with change, cannot ignore these questions—especially in the context of the Anthropocene, AI, and genocide. As Sarah White reminds us, if we deny the humanity of others, we deny our own. I've had the privilege of teaching for over a decade in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, focusing on human development and the capability approach. One of my students, Issa Amro, a human rights activist, was awarded the Livelihoods Award this year. When I asked him what we could do for him, he said: Please let the world remember that we are humans. When the international system collapses, it is our responsibility to uphold what it means to be human. This must be central to development studies.

Religion and development

The second area I've engaged with is religion and development. When I joined Bath, I became part of a research project based at the University of Birmingham exploring this field. It emerged in the early 2000s, during the optimism surrounding the Millenium Development Goals and the recognition of faith-based organisations' roles in poverty reduction, health, and education. After all, 85% of the world's population professes some religious belief, and by 2050, two-thirds will be either Christian or Muslim. The field has since evolved into two main branches: humanitarianism, and religion and ecology. Interestingly, few people talk about 'religion and development' anymore. My current research focuses on faith actors in social and environmental justice struggles in Latin America. I'm leading a project on the Catholic Church's role in mining—particularly in the DRC and Latin America—where it acts as a major social and educational player and a source of local resistance.

Is this still development studies? I'm not sure. I collaborate with peace studies scholars, theologians, and area studies experts. Perhaps ecological studies are the future. Personally, I'm drawn to the idea of shifting from 'development studies' to 'solidarity studies'. Everything is interconnected, and we must recover that sense of solidarity. We need to confront power inequalities and our own complicity in injustice—especially in extractive industries. Communities I work with in Latin America see 'development' as a toxic word. For them, development destroys in the name of jobs and poverty reduction. Governments use this discourse to justify mineral extraction and infrastructure projects. In response, these communities are exploring alternatives: degrowth, 'Buen Vivir', and what we in Catholic circles call integral ecology—a vision of social and economic change based on harmony and well-being across systems.

To conclude, development studies, as it stands, has the resources to address challenges of peace and ecological balance. But it must also evolve. I leave it to our discussion to identify what resources we already have—and what needs to change. We must incorporate new approaches to address the two existential issues on which our survival depends: peace and ecology. If we fail to do so, then in 50 or 100 years, with the trajectory of global warming, who is to say where humanity will end up.

David Lewis is Professor of anthropology and development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he has worked since 1995. He completed his PhD at Bath in 1989. This was followed by three years as a CDS research fellow.

Thank you to the organisers for inviting me to this wonderful event. It's a real privilege to be here and to be back in Bath. Being here brings back many reflections and good memories. It was lovely to see Geof in his video—he was my PhD supervisor, and I still try to emulate his level of care and attention in my own supervisory work, though I don't always succeed! It was a great way to be introduced to the world of development research. My connection to Bath goes even further back—my father taught at the University in the 1960s and 70s, and I grew up watching this institution take shape. So, returning here is a particular pleasure.

Today I want to talk about something that might seem a little left field, but I hope it resonates. If time permits then I will also offer a few thoughts on broader debates in development studies, which I find both important and timely. The ideas I'm sharing are based on recent work, though I've been thinking about these ideas for a long time. I believe development studies is indeed in need of change and renewal—not just because the world is changing, but also because the challenges we face are constantly evolving. It's also important to periodically question the

foundations of our knowledge: our epistemologies, our disciplinary frameworks, and the assumptions we carry.

This led me to explore what I've come to call the 'development humanities.' What makes development studies distinctive isn't just its subject matter or its commitment to social change—it's also its multidisciplinary nature. We often talk about multidisciplinarity as if it's easy or automatic, but the reality is it's tricky. Some disciplines are taken more seriously than others, and each has one its own epistemology and way of validating knowledge claims. Bringing them together meaningfully is difficult and rarely done well in the social sciences. My interest in this area grew out of teaching development studies, but also from being a keen reader of novels and a consumer of films and music. I often found myself thinking - 'this is relevant.' For example, reading Rohinton Mistry's novel 'A Fine Balance' gave me deeper insights into livelihoods, household poverty, and vulnerability than many World Bank reports or academic papers. That was one of the experiences that made me realise that literature and the arts can offer profound perspectives on development.

More recently, I became aware of fields like the 'environmental humanities' and the 'medical humanities'. These pay attention to the fact that literature, poetry, music, and the broader humanities are essential to understanding well-being and lived experience. If these approaches offer new insights to health and environmental studies, why not in development? Development is complex and multidimensional—it could benefit from this kind of approach. So, I began to think more systematically about how we might widen the multidisciplinary base of development studies. Not just to complement what we already do, but to challenge and question our assumptions about what development is and how it happens. This is also a response to the increasing prioritisation of STEM subjects and the growing emphasis on quantification, big data, and data science within the social sciences and which has tended to marginalise the humanities.

What would development humanities look like? One theme is how development is imagined and experienced at the human level. If the humanities are about understanding what it means to be human, then engaging with a broader range of texts and sources can offer rich insights. Development studies has engaged with history, for example, but often in limited ways—through concepts like 'path dependency'. Historians have a far wider range of methodologies and conceptual tools that could help us better understand context and contingency, which are crucial for development policy and practice. There's too much standardisation and decontextualisation in development work and I believe the humanities could help us do better. A new subfield of 'development humanities' could help us to build new methods and insights, both enriching and to challenging existing approaches. It could also help us ask deeper questions about the status of different kinds of knowledge and evidence.

This approach also opens space up for engaging with power and representation, especially in the context of decolonisation. It allows us to bring in unfamiliar voices and perspectives, particularly from the global South. It helps us understand experience more fully. For instance, when we talk about Palestine and de-development, we should be reading Sarah Ahmed—but also Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, which vividly conveys the lived experience of occupation and genocide. Development humanities could also help us engage with affect and emotion. I recently read a paper by John Cameron on the role of music in NGO fundraising—how music shapes engagement with development practice. This kind of work invites us to think creatively and imaginatively. Robin mentioned the need for creativity, and I agree—it's central to the humanities. There's even interesting work on using science fiction as a model for thought experiments around development issues. This kind of imaginative engagement can be powerful.

It also challenges the old 'two cultures' divide between sciences and humanities. We need both facts and emotions. Development humanities could help bring these together. It's also a great way to teach. My former colleague John Harris designed a course where each week students read an academic text, a policy document, and a novel on the same development topic. Students responded well to seeing issues through multiple lenses—it gave them a more multidimensional perspective.

Of course, there are risks. We don't want to use the humanities in a superficial way. Many of us quote novels in our research papers just to illustrate a point or add colour. That's not what I'm advocating here. I'm calling for a deeper, more radical interdisciplinarity—one that leads us to question assumptions and contribute to critical thinking and action beyond academia and the aid world. Development humanities could broaden our field, making it more transdisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary. But we must avoid turning it into a cosy or escapist exercise. There's been criticism in some quarters of the medical humanities for this—doctors wandering around with poetry books at workshops, not taken seriously. I'm not arguing for that. I'm asking for something deeper.

I had a few more points to make about the future of development studies, but I'll save those for the discussion. Thank you very much for listening and for indulging me in this exploration.

Session 2 discussion

Chris Harris, a PhD alumnus, endorsed Ben Radley's emphasis on the export dependency and lack of internal economic levers of many countries in the global South. Drawing on his own interest in climate change, he raised the idea of moving manufacturing upstream to the resource base for environmental reasons. He noted that while countries like China have successfully industrialised, others such as Russia have not, and that resource dependency is not limited to the Global South—Australia and Canada, for example, remain heavily reliant on commodities. He asked whether it is a good idea to move from resource extraction to manufacturing and, if so, why it is not happening. Ben Radley responded by highlighting the historical context of settler colonialism in countries like Australia and Canada, where colonial constraints on global migration aligned income levels to those of the colonising countries. This, he argued, created a different set of internal economic dynamics that made these economies more resilient to external shocks, despite their commodity dependence. He acknowledged that many national development strategies aspire to move up the value chain but explained that late industrialisation is extremely difficult due to entrenched global economic structures, technological gaps, and the resource-intensive nature of industrialisation. Development studies is well placed to analyse these challenges through its interdisciplinary lens.

John Troyer, a non-development specialist from the Dept of Social and Policy Sciences, reflected on it being exactly 24 years since the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers. He recalled how the administration of George W Bush used development rhetoric to counterbalance military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and deployed Andrew Natsios, then head of USAID, on TV to promote a narrative of benevolence – that the USA was not a war mongering nation intent on destruction. He recalled thinking 'hmm really' and wondering if this was the beginning of the end - the end of U.S. credibility as a development actor. Recalling this, he asked if it was now time for countries to move forward without American involvement altogether, without its funding, and without the concept of America, whatever that might be. Ben Radley responded by referring to

Samir Amin's theory of 'delinking', advocating that countries reorient their development strategies away from the demands of the global economy and towards the needs of their own populations and regions. He emphasised that delinking is not isolationism, but resisting externally imposed economic logics that push countries into commodity exporting roles.

Jean Boulton agreed with David Lewis that if one of the foundational myths of development studies is a belief in or search for universal models then the humanities, with their embrace of complexity and multiple voices, can help to challenge this. David Lewis agreed, reiterating that development is inherently multi-dimensional and contextual, noting also that universal if widely rejected ideas like modernisation theory do still exert significant global influence.

Katharina Lenner questioned the distinction between 'global' and 'international' development. She asked whether panellists leaned toward a global framing, given the interconnected nature of contemporary challenges, or whether the distinction itself was misguided. Mihika Chatterjee pointed out that global linkages and interconnections have always been central to how development studies analyses the political economy of growth and structural transformation. To understand the prospects for post-colonies under 20th-century capitalism necessarily meant thinking globally. In contrast, the current turn to 'global' at a time of funding constraints in academia poses a threat to knowledge production from the 'periphery'. To further clarify this point, she reframed the question provocatively by asking whether *solidarity* in development studies should be based on a universal understanding of suffering or whether it should retain a specific focus on the Global South.

James Copestake offered three reflections on development studies as a community – 'broad and mostly friendly', 'continuously evolving', but also 'very small'. *Broad* and *mostly friendly*, or ecumenical, because it can and does already accommodate many ways of defining and analysing development – micro *and* macro, global *and* international, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary – each adding something to our inevitably partial and fallible understanding of a highly complex topic. He welcomed contributions from the arts and humanities, but also those that advance broader generalisations as well as exploring their limitations. *Constantly evolving*, both because the subject matter is doing so, and through learning from the tensions between diverse perspectives. This is reflected, he observed, in increasingly diverse (geographically, thematically and in terms of disciplines) participation in Development Studies Association conferences. Lastly, he emphasised that it's a relatively very *small* community. Picking up on Judith Randel's observation, he observed that more students already graduate from Bath with degrees in politics and IR than in development studies, let alone those who graduate in economics, engineering, science, or management. Recognising this means acknowledging the limited influence of development studies and being pragmatic about holding on to its relatively small foothold in universities like Bath. It also means having realistic expectations about what development studies can achieve, recognising that it nearly always plays a rearguard action, given that governments, large corporations, commercial banks are far larger drivers of global change than specialised development institutions. For this reason, he applauded Robin Guy's pragmatic willingness to talk with financial institutions, subject to not being coopted by them. A more modest but realistic goal for development studies, he suggested is to hold on to a space to reflect critically on others' visions of progress, sovereignty, autonomy and wellbeing, – to be a clearing house and an interdisciplinary source of analysis of partial,

self-interested, overly simplistic generalisations, and would-be hegemonic development projects.

Wesam Wekhyan, a current PhD student, thanked the speakers and endorsed the importance of recognising the emotional and relational dimensions of development research. She spoke about the importance of being open to knowledge from unfamiliar contexts and translating that knowledge into meaningful action. Her comments were warmly received. Severine Deneulin responded by noting how the term "development" carries different meanings in different regions. In Latin America, for example, she had learnt that it's often associated with destruction. This explained why she often described her research to those outside the development studies community in other ways - as being about social and environmental justice, for example.

James Copestake then wrapped up the session by thanking the panellists, chairs, and organisers, including Aurelie Charles, Asha Amirali, Mihika Chatterjee, Rachel Willis and staff from the Advancement Dept. He encouraged alumni to maintain contact, including through the CDS and Bath alumni websites. He reiterated the importance of maintaining the development studies community as a broad space for critical reflection and engagement, even if it remains small and modest in its institutional reach, accustomed to having limited influence, but remaining politically committed and intellectually lively.

Appendix

Graduates linked to the Centre for Development Studies (1975-2024) [a]

Years	BSc		MSc		PhD	School/Department home
1975-1997	0		277	d	9	SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
1998-2008	211	b	407	e	43	DEPT OF ECONOMICS & INT. DEV
2009-2024	423	c	490	f	112	DEPT OF SOCIAL & POLICY SCIENCES
TOTAL	634		1174	g	164	

Notes

a - Including only programmes with 'development' in their title, thus excluding many more students who opted into development units from other programmes.

b - BSc in Economics and International Development (EID)

c - BSc in EID to 2017, and BSc in International Development with Economics (IDwE) from 2019

d - MSc in Development Studies

e - MSc in Development Studies (1998-99), MSc International Development (2000-08), MSc Wellbeing & Human Development (2008), MSc Economics (Development) (2003-08)

f - MSc in International Development (2009-24), including multiple streams after 2011) (2009-2024), MSc Wellbeing & Human Development (2019), MSc in Conflict, Humanitarianism and Development

g - excludes MRes(Development), and MSc in Humanitarianism, Conflict & Development