

Roundtable on Reimagining Development: How do practice-based approaches shape the localisation of development?

Towards its goal of tackling significant local and global challenges, the Institute for Global Development (IGD) at the University of New South Wales is forging a research and practice stream that seeks to 'reimagine' development. This stream forms part of the IGD's Partnerships, Practice and Global Goals Initiative, which aims to build partnerships that balance the rights of communities to determine their development pathways while contributing to collective goals.

Overview & Purpose of Roundtables

A series of two virtual roundtables, convened by IGD Research to Practice Associate Dr George Varughese, have brought together a small group of scholars, practitioners, and donors to discuss and refine inputs on a selected set of ideas and case studies that are central to the reimagining agenda.

The body of work emerging from these roundtables will be drawn on to explore and develop a method for reimagining development in contexts of uncertainty and disruption. The roundtables will also lay the foundation for a potential future program of collaborative activity.

The first roundtable provided a forum for the presentation and discussion of five papers which will provide specific case studies and act as catalysts for conversation. The second roundtable drew together key themes and lessons from the first roundtable to identify concrete next steps. The roundtables have also provided the initial basis for networking a strategic community, to begin to engage in a discourse on reimagining development from a research to praxis perspective. Participants included private sector, academic research, and practice-based organizations, who are interested in creative approaches to supporting development in disrupted and transitional contexts within and around Australia.

Discussion Summary

On 9 November 2020, the Institute for Global Development hosted a roundtable on 'Reimagining Development: How do Practice-Based Approaches Shape the Localisation of Development?'. The roundtable built on preparatory webinars and discussions conducted over the past two months with the aim to build partnerships between a network of academics, private sector, practitioners, and policymakers for reimagining development that balances the rights of communities to determine their development pathways while contributing to collective goals.

The workshop was convened and led by Dr George Varughese, Research to Practice Associate at the Institute for Global Development and Senior Strategic Advisor at Niti Foundation. In alluding to the idea underpinning his paper 'Reimagining Development for a Disrupted World', Dr Varghese set the tone for the roundtable. He spoke of how the disruptions and shifts in development contexts of the 21st century are substantial and require a reimagining of disciplinary referents, signifiers, and orientations while supporting activities that (re)insert deeply contextual and practical knowledge to reframe the discourse and the practice of development.

After Dr Varughese, participants interacted around four short papers with the help of authors and designated commentators. The intention was to have an open-ended conversation that echoed, challenged, and supplemented the reimagining ideas explored in the papers. An overview of the discussion prompted by the four papers is provided below.

'Localising Developmental Leadership in an Uncertain World' by Professor Chris Roche (Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University) and Dr Lisa Denney (Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University), with Dr Kaitlin Shilling (Arup) as commentator

Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn into sharp focus the need for international development actors to experiment with new approaches, in particular delegating authority, not just responsibility, to local actors. The present disruptions thus provide an important moment to engage in reimagining localization and locally led development agendas. This must be done while also navigating significant uncertainty and ambiguity. Adaptation is thus key – avoiding what Scoones and Stirling in their book *The Politics of Uncertainty: Challenges of Transformation* call the 'invisible foreclosing of possible futures' and learning to move 'from calculative control to creative care'.*

Particular focus must be given to the ways in which localization/locally led development, conditioned in uncertain and ambiguous contexts, shapes new approaches to development practice. This exploration will be done by drawing from case studies in PNG, the Pacific, and Indigenous Australian communities.

Discussion

Professor Roche and Dr Denny's paper focused on the dissonance between rhetorical commitments to localisation and the limited changes in development practice. It also explored if, and how, critical junctures like the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and effort to decolonise development practice (among other phenomena) provide support to greater localisation.

The paper prompted discussion on the outcomes of development work. Professor Roche and Dr Shilling both raised the question: Who decides what outcomes are of value? Professor Roche highlighted the pervasive problem that the recipients of development, who should decide what is of value in development, are still often the least heard. Questions were also asked of the value that aid programs bring and the ways to cross-pollinate between local and imported expertise to make programs effective and drive innovation.

The discussion also led to the acknowledgement of institutional racism in the development sector and the need to reimagine organisational processes within the development sector to fit it for purpose. These processes range from the procurement to how requests for proposals are written, holidays are authorised, the way development agencies describe their vacancies, and the values placed by aid projects on educational qualification rather than skills.

'The Significance of History for Development' by Professor Bernardo A. Michael (Messiah University) with Professor Chris Roche (Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University) as commentator

Abstract

Development practitioners who are deeply committed to meeting the needs of ordinary citizens around the world stand to gain much from a historical view of their work. Historical perspectives shed new light on how the oft ignored past ultimately creates the spaces and places that practitioners now work in. These spaces and places (i.e. contexts) clearly constrain or enable development work in diverse and contingent ways. Along with their unintended consequences and outcomes, historical constraints and enablers remain largely unrecognized by those who design and practice development.

Understanding human and ecological adaptation and the role of uncertainty form the staple diet of intellectual work undertaken by historians. Historians (who examine the past) share with policy makers (who seek to determine the future) a concern for complexity and uncertainty. In that context, some development practitioners have begun looking at broadening traditionally held views of political economy for a greater emphasis on insights from the field of history. There seems to be a 'historical turn' taking place in writings on development especially when it comes to understanding the institutional characteristics of societies that might promote or hinder economic, social, and political development. This paper will reflect upon how the work of historians can provide lessons for development practitioners on how to be more critical of their own starting points, assumptions, and expectations.

Discussion

Professor Michael's paper focused on how the work of historians can illuminate lessons for development practitioners by providing ways to be more critical of their own starting points, assumptions, and expectations. Against the backdrop of the 'historical turn' taking place in writings on development – especially regarding understanding the institutional characteristics of societies that might promote or hinder economic growth, social and economic development – the paper explored ways historians can help the development practitioners in understanding uncertainty and complexity – a concept that history discipline is familiar with.

The discussion centred around how social sciences, including history, have become increasingly insular and how fewer historians are willing to branch out into other disciplines, including international development. The reason, as Professor Michael suggested, was the way tenure works in (American) academia. The discussants reiterated the need for overlap and collaboration between disciplines. The discussion led to big questions: How can history be better inserted into development and a development studies curriculum? And, what sort of historians are important for development? To the latter, Professor Michael suggested that historians who can link formal training in academia and experience outside will be helpful.

'Public Participation in Development Initiatives within Conflict-Affected Contexts' by Dr Dinesha Samararatne (Melbourne Law School) with Ainsley Hemming (Department of Jobs, Victoria State Government) as commentator

Abstract

Today, most countries classified as least developed countries (LDCs) are also conflict affected. Development programs in such contexts are a hybrid of peacebuilding, humanitarian, and other more conventional initiatives. Specifically, constitutional and other legal reform initiatives comprise core elements, usually given priority in sequencing of development assistance. While public participation in post-conflict development initiatives has developed into something of an international norm for local ownership in recovery and rebuilding, it remains rooted in Northern logics and assumptions about the material conditions of such conflict-affected societies.

Drawing on insights from constitutional development processes in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Nepal, this paper will critically reflect on why public participation in such development contexts needs to be better rationalized for durable, positive outcomes.

Discussion

In her paper, Dr Samararatne focused on how the public participation, rooted in Northern logics and assumptions, gives rise to dilemmas about the impact, design and risk of development initiatives. Participation can lead to problems of unmet expectations, polarisation, political dissatisfaction, and ultimately democratic disenchantment. Drawing on the insights from constitutional development processes in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Nepal, the paper provided a critical reflection on the expectations and function of direct public participation. In doing so, the paper highlighted six dimensions of public participation: (1)

conflict resolution and state formation; (2) democratisation; (3) transparency and accountability (4) the transnational; (5) literacy (civic, legal, constitutional); and (6) resources and time.

The subsequent discussion raised important questions about the normative framework on which the development sector is based. Ms Hemming added that the normative framework of public participation – based on the Western liberal idea needs to be critically assessed and that Dr Samarartne’s six dimensions offer a useful framework. Other participants raised the practical question regarding the ideal degree of public participation that should be pursued and the information asymmetry between the donors and the participants that often pervades participatory and deliberative exercises in development contexts.

‘Tackling Knowledge Crisis in Development: Insights from Deliberative Practice and Action Research-Based Strategies from Nepal’ by Dr Hemant Ojha (Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra & Institute for Study and Development Worldwide) and Dr Mani Ram Banjade (NIMS College) with Mohan Das Manandhar (Niti Foundation) as commentator

Abstract

A number of experimental and some well-functioning practitioner initiatives have emerged in the past decade or so that seek to develop strategies and methods that improve the knowledge interface and policy learning in development contexts. These initiatives involve leadership provided by local organizations and a variety of partnerships and collaborations with international development actors. The review of selected development initiatives will focus on knowledge politics, action-based learning, and deliberation.

Four key questions will guide the review: 1) how practical epistemologies have been conceived, embraced and mobilized; 2) how various kinds of deliberative practices and forums have been framed, organised, and delivered; 3) what strategies have been adopted to facilitate learning processes around policy development and implementation; and 4) how researchers and practitioners have interacted with policy actors and what international development collaborations have helped in such interactions.

Discussion

The first part of Dr Ojha and Dr Banjade’s paper identified and explored five blockages to knowledge production and application in international development. These are: (1) self-defensive development management; (2) disengaged research; (3) policy technocracy; (4) romantic valorisation of the community and group action; and (e) acting technically while claiming to be political. The second part of the paper focused on the lessons that can be gleaned from deliberative practice and action research-based strategies in Nepal. To do so, it explored how Nepali NGOs and think tanks have applied a policy lab methodology to challenge the settled wisdom around development practice, and to integrate a deliberative dimension into policy formation so that the development practices do not miss the merits of contextual and value-based engagement in development.

The discussion led by Mr Manandhar focused on the idea of the ‘public’ in public policy. Questions were also raised on the limited role that academics play in policymaking in Nepal and the ways that different actors, especially academics, can be engaged in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policy.

Looking Forward

While the four papers were used to anchor the ‘reimagining’ agenda, the discussion was not limited to the papers. The roundtable discussed big concepts, including that of ‘justice’ and ‘trust’, and questioned the normative assumptions and methods that guide development practitioners. It also began to explore what the reorientation of normative referents may mean for practice and implementation.

A further roundtable was held to firm up future themes of collaborative discussion and research. This workshop, as part of the IGD's work on 'Reimagining Development', will be important to generating and consolidating knowledge on what development is, what it could be, and how we get there. More information will be available shortly.