

# Preface

The rising powers in international development are rising fast, and China most rapidly of all. As the world moves towards a post-2015 agenda, we are in a very different world from the one where the dominant paradigms around aid and development cooperation evolved. Conventional aid agendas reflect patterns of colonialism; and where, in the system created following the Second World War, European and US leadership and hegemony were a vital element. Even 15 years ago, when the Millennium Development Goals were established, development policy and finance were dominated by flows of expertise and resources from mostly Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to low-income ones, mostly in Africa and Asia. We are now in a far more polycentric and multi-polar, if also uncertain, world. Global partnerships and multi-way cooperation to address shared global challenges around economy and sustainability, along with poverty and inequality wherever they arise, are increasingly the guiding ideas for a new era of development thinking and action.

China's recent rise is both a cause and a symptom of the fundamental sea change now affecting development assistance and policy. In focusing on China and international development, this *IDS Bulletin* offers a landmark not just in understanding China's shifting roles, but this emerging development era more broadly. As it documents, China's concerted efforts to address poverty and inequality within its own borders over the last few decades, its growing influence as a development actor in other countries – especially Africa, and its rising influence in international development policy and financing, all add up to a significant new picture. These experiences

highlight vital opportunities for mutual learning between the old industrial powers, rising powers such as China, and still-to-rise countries in Africa and beyond, about how to think about and 'do' development both at home and abroad.

Current Chinese development activities also reflect cultural complexities and legacies with deep roots in China's own history and values. China was a global superpower in much earlier eras; in the 1400s its exploratory ships arguably reached American shores long before Europeans did. Intervening centuries have seen social, cultural, political and economic change and turbulence that long pre-dates, and yet surely influences, China's recent rise to prominence. With notable Chinese scholars and analysts, including some of our most valued partners, prominent among the authors of this *IDS Bulletin*, we begin to see how far Chinese narratives, paradigms and practices about development and the future differ from Western ones. In starting to unpack these complexities, this *IDS Bulletin* offers a vital contribution to analysis and policy. But it is clearly only the tip of a very large and important iceberg.

Chinese development action, as the editors point out, is currently running ahead of our capacity to analyse it. This *IDS Bulletin* signals the importance of getting up to speed with the present and future, while appreciating the legacy of the past. I hope it will stimulate and further open up debate among analysts and practitioners across China and the world, around how we can learn together to shape futures that affect us all.

**Melissa Leach**  
**Director, Institute of Development Studies**