

Reinventing Development Research: Listening to the IDS40 Roundtables

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1 Introduction

The title of this article is knowingly immodest. Who, you may think, says development research needs to be reinvented? Who is IDS to encourage a series of meetings on such a theme? To tell you the truth, I do not think many at IDS had given the first question enough systematic thought – I certainly had not. And while IDS is one of the largest and oldest development research institutes in Europe, we fully recognise that in the UK alone there are 160 other organisations undertaking development research (Haddad *et al.* 2006). But any organisation that prides itself on challenging the *status quo* has to also challenge itself, especially in its fortieth year. And taking on the current state of development research is surely the key element in such a self-assessment.

In an attempt to be true to our values of listening, of widespread participation and to searching for a diversity of views, we invited our partners and alumni to organise one-day Roundtables as part of the IDS fortieth anniversary process to identify and discuss the major development issues of the day, the medium-term opportunities and threats to development and the implications for development research.² In total, 46 Roundtables were held: 12 in ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 11 in nine Asian countries, four in South America, one in the Caribbean, three in North America, eight in continental Europe, six in the UK and one in cyberspace (see Box 1). Each Roundtable prepared a short report summarising the discussions that took place, now available on the IDS website (www.ids.ac.uk).

This article is my attempt to convey what I heard from these Roundtables. I attended 13 of them in ten countries and have read the other reports with a

great deal of interest. While I have been methodical in going through the Roundtable reports, this article is not an overview or a synthesis, but a personal reflection on what the reports have to say. I hope we can persuade others to reflect, in writing, on what the Roundtables say to them. My interpretation will inevitably be influenced by my own values and experiences. As an economist, I have a taught tendency to the technocratic and to avoid messy reality, so look out for occasional apolitical and ahistorical perspectives. Concerns with social justice run deep in my psyche – so watch out for any downplaying of growth and efficiency. My positionality is also important – as IDS Director, I always want IDS to look good, so be on the lookout for a certain lack of reflexivity on my part.

The article is structured in the following way. First, there are the observations that are common to many Roundtable participants, particularly the acceleration in the pace of change of international power balances and in the environment. This acceleration is combined with a sense of growing commonality in the issues that concern the participants – regardless of their location or relative affluence. Such a growing commonality moves some Roundtables to suggest that development must become a global discourse – a discourse that does not problematise around the haves and the have-nots. Second, there are issues that seem specific to particular regions. These are met with very different context-specific responses – observed and proposed – but perhaps with increasingly common causes. Third, there is a discussion of what is implied for development research in terms of scope, priorities, methods, actors and relationships. It is clear from this section that if development research is to be

Box 1 Locations of IDS40 Roundtables

Australia (University of New South Wales, Organiser: Marc Williams, 21 April 2006)
Bangladesh (Centre for Policy Dialogue, Organisers: CPD and Martin Greeley, 24–25 May 2006)
Brazil (CEBRAP, Organisers: Zander Navarro and CEBRAP, 25–26 May 2006)
Cambodia (CDRI, Organiser: Larry Strange, 22 June 2006)
Canada (IDRC, Organiser: David O'Brien, 20 May 2006)
Chile (Santiago, Organisers: Emanuel de Kadt and Osvaldo Sunkel, 29 November 2005)
China (DFID–China, Organisers: Li Xiaoyuan and Qi Gubo, 4 July 2006)
China (Kunming Medical College, Yunnan, Organiser: Fang Jing, 7 May 2006)
Colombia (Bogotá, Organiser: Jacques Mérat, 29 April 2006)
Denmark (University of Aalborg, Organiser: Mammo Muchie, 31 May 2006)
Ecuador (Quito, Organiser: Andres Mejia Acosta, 6 September 2006)
Ethiopia (WFP, Organiser: Mohamed Diab, 26 May 2006)
E-Roundtable (Organisers: Richard Longhurst and Michael Lipton's PhD students, April–May 2006)
France (AFD, Organisers: Robert Pecaud and Nicolas Meisel, 30 March 2006)
Ghana (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Organiser: Takyiwaa Manuh, 4 May 2006)
India (Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, Organiser: Gopal Kadekodi, 20 June 2006)
India (Delhi, Organisers: Surendra Vetrivel and Arjun Khajuria, 29–30 April 2006)
Ireland (University College Dublin, Organisers: Mary McKeown and Majda Bne Saad, 25 April 2006)
Japan (British Council, Organisers: Ken Inoue and Sanae Ito, 30 June 2006)
Kenya (Youth Agenda, Nairobi, Organisers: Biki Kangwana and Celestine Nyamu, 15 June 2006)
Kenya (IDS–Nairobi, Organiser: Dorothy McCormick, 16 June 2006)
Malawi (ActionAid, Organisers: ActionAid and Stephen Devereux, 25 July 2006)
Mexico (Mexico City, Organiser: Roberto Castellanos, 3–4 August 2006)
Mozambique (Maputo, Organiser: Professor Sir Richard Jolly, 11 December 2005)
The Netherlands (Organiser: Euforic/ISS, 27 November 2006)
Nigeria (Gender and Development Action, Organiser: Nkoyo Toyo, 8 February 2006)
Norway (Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Organisers: NORAGRIC and Lyla Mehta, 21 April 2006)
Pakistan (Collective for Social Science Research, Organiser: Haris Gazdar, 15 April 2006)
Senegal (AFD–Dakar, Organiser: Nicolas Meisel, 26 June 2006)
Senegal (CODESRIA–Dakar, Organisers: Adebayo Olukoshi and Jean-Bernard Ouedrago, 18 July 2006)
South Africa (University of Cape Town, Organiser: Mike Morris, 22 May 2006)
Spain (FRIDE, Organiser: Stefan Meyer, 3 July 2006)
Sri Lanka (Women and Media Collective, Organiser: Sepali Kottegodra, 19 July 2006)
Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Organiser: Mats Harsmar, 12 June 2006)
Switzerland (ILO, Organisers: Alan Leather, Anne Posthuma and Gerry Rodgers, 18 May 2006)
Tanzania (DFID–Tanzania, Organiser: Roy Trivedy, 1 June 2006)
Thailand (IMA International, Organiser: IMA International, 30 November 2005)
Trinidad and Tobago (University of the West Indies, Organiser: Dennis Pantin, 16 July 2006)
Uganda (Makerere University, Organiser: Evelyn Nyakoojo, 19 April 2006)
UK (Brighton, Organiser: Andrew Barnett, 16 June 2006)
UK (Brighton and Hove Sixth Form College, Organiser: Tarquin Grossman, 17 July 2006)
UK (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Organiser: Tim Shaw, 3 April 2006)
UK (IDS, Organiser: Charlotte Matthews, 6 July 2006)
UK (University of Leeds, Organiser: Ruth Pearson, 30 June 2006)
UK (University of Sussex, Organisers: Lizzie Valdivieso and Carina Pimenta, 31 May 2006)
USA (UNIFEM, Organiser: Anne Marie Goetz, 27 June 2006)
USA (Washington, Organiser: Susan Fleck, August 2006)

reinvented it is because the changing nature of development demands it. But, before moving to these issues, it is worth describing the Roundtable approach that generated them.

2 Roundtable methodology

The word 'methodology' implies a certain purposiveness in how information is generated. But our preference for the Roundtables to be an organic, self-motivated set of events mitigated against us, determining the Roundtable location, host, participants, topic and method of reporting. IDS was able to support modest local costs in each location and was able to have a staff presence at the majority of the Roundtables, when invited, but otherwise these were events driven by the host (be that our alumni partners or potential partners). Given the links most of the hosts have to IDS, we were mindful of the danger of group-thinking and encouraged them to ask the really difficult questions and to be honestly critical of IDS, if necessary.

Of the 46 hosts, 24 were partners, eight were alumni, and 14 were potential partners. A total of 22 of them were research institutes (11 within universities and others). Of the others, six were non-governmental organisations (NGOs), four bilateral donors, one national government, two private sector companies, three multilateral agencies; and eight Roundtables were hosted by alumni with no specific institutional affiliation.

The Roundtables assembled some 1,500 participants (33 per cent from sub-Saharan Africa, 15 per cent from East Asia, 5 per cent from South Asia, 10 per cent from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), 24 per cent from Europe, 5 per cent from North America and 8 per cent from the UK). There were no Roundtables in North Africa and the Middle East, Central Asia or Eastern Europe, which reflects our relative lack of partners and alumni from these regions – a consequence of the geographic priorities of IDS funders and IDS research staff. The participants came from universities or research institutes (52 per cent), NGOs (15 per cent), from international organisations (14 per cent), national governments (8 per cent), donors (5 per cent), the private sector (4 per cent) and 2 per cent were from the media. While we wanted to hear from a wide range of people from all over the world, we recognise that nearly all of the meetings were held in capital cities, so did not hear first hand from those

living in poorer more remote areas. We also note that the Roundtables cannot claim to speak for an entire country or city – but that they reflect individual assessments and perceptions, albeit conditioned by location.

Beyond the three broad questions we posed – what might be (a) the challenges to development in the short term, (b) opportunities and threats in the medium term and (c) the implications for development research – the individual Roundtables organised themselves very differently. Those held in Africa, Asia and Latin America tended to focus on issues affecting development and research in their countries and regions. Some donor-country Roundtables were issue focused (e.g. Stockholm on agriculture in African countries; London on security) while most were more open-ended.

3 Acceleration and commonalities

Whether global economic, physical, political and social phenomena follow some kind of Moore's Law³ is difficult to verify, but clearly the participants felt that they do. The perceived acceleration of trends such as climate change, migration, economic growth, democratisation and increased information availability creates a sense of uncertainty and, in the context of weak capacity to manage that uncertainty, leads to vulnerability – both real and perceived.

The global scope of these phenomena obviously ensures that their effects are felt in many different places. And notwithstanding the fact that all the organising hosts had some connection to IDS, there were a number of issues that nearly all the Roundtables raised as affecting them locally.

3.1 China and India

China seems to have a strategy for Africa, but Africa does not seem to have a strategy for China. (Nairobi-IDS Roundtable)

Nothing seemed to have changed the backyard view more than the economic and political emergence of China and India. The economic back-story of these two giants is well known – long periods of high growth, with significant government involvement, although in very different ways. Such growth is not unprecedented – South Korea and Japan had similar long-lasting booms, but it is the sheer size of these two giants that is sending reverberations around the

world. Whether garment industries in Bangladesh and Kenya, the soybean export industry in Brazil, or oil and gas extraction in Cambodia and Nigeria, the Roundtables stressed the need for countries the world over to be able to seize new economic opportunities and minimise new risks.

The political ramifications are also beginning to be worked through by many countries. Beyond high-profile issues such as the pressure for the reform of multilateral governance, a number of power shifts are playing out the world over. When the donor community is worried about loss of influence to China in a country as heavily aid-dependent as Cambodia, you know they are really worried (Phnom Penh Roundtable). The democracies probably feel that India, as the world's largest democracy, is the more predictable to deal with, with the Chinese landscape being the hardest to navigate. Certainly, as the Tokyo Roundtable noted, the world is sitting on the edge of its seat wondering if and how the Chinese transition to political pluralism will happen and how fraught the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world will be. The Karachi Roundtable concluded that the nature of the trade and security agreements between and with China and India would be key to the development of the region and perhaps the world.

On aid, as the Ottawa Roundtable pointed out, it will be important for all to understand China and India's 'framework conditions for ODA'. The conditions or motivations are not post-colonial, nor will they necessarily be based on typically stated Western motives such as aid for trade, charity, social justice or human rights. Whatever they are, they will be influenced by each having millions of people living in abject poverty in their own countries. What can we expect – what combination of pure self-interest and idealism will we see and what will it mean for recipients and the 'first wave' donors?

3.2 The loss of certainties about neoliberal orthodoxy

We must neither submit to nor break away from globalisation. (São Paulo Roundtable)

Discontent with the neoliberal orthodoxy – both its content and the way in which it was pushed – ran high. The Santiago Roundtable said it was time to reconsider past ideas such as 'redistribution with growth' and urged the development of new

paradigms of development to fill the void. The São Paulo Roundtable stated that 'economic orthodoxy has been a formula for neutralising growth'. Moreover it was simply not good enough any more to assign any lack of growth response to a standard economic package to a country's 'democratic deficit' (Dhaka Roundtable). This debate has been given fresh impetus by China's economic performance. Will the West be forced to consider and draw on new intellectual bases (Tokyo Roundtable)? Is the experience of China turning growth models on their head? Or just a validation of a long-forgotten truth about the sequencing of growth and openness and the need to recognise that there are variations on the capitalist model of growth that could help reduce poverty (Cape Town Roundtable). Two of the Latin American Roundtables (São Paulo and Santiago) bemoaned a lack of a national development vision – it is not just enough to go wherever the market leads. Finally, the Sydney Roundtable wondered if the relative neglect of the ethical dimensions of development might be due to the decline of socialism creating a moral vacuum.

3.3 Growing inequality

At least 11 of the Roundtables: São Paulo, Santiago, Cape Town, Bangalore, Nairobi-IDS, Phnom Penh, Dhaka, Bangalore, Yunnan, Sydney and Copenhagen) mentioned growing inequality as a key concern. In the boomtown of Bangalore (described by the participants as a 'successful outpost of globalisation') the Roundtable stressed that while the municipal and state governments do not need to do much to promote growth, they have a big role in making the city liveable for all, especially for poor people. But no matter what Bangalore city or state governments do, the executive management teams from Bangalore's most successful firms feel the need move to the USA in order to 'share in the command and control' of globalisation processes – leaving even successful outposts such as Bangalore at 'the other end of globalisation'. Many of the participants noted that while measures of relative inequality were stable and in some cases, falling (São Paulo), (a) absolute income inequality (the gap between the incomes of the rich and poor) was rising; (b) other inequalities were increasing (e.g. health outcomes, Yunnan; the ability to manage information, Nairobi-IDS; gender inequalities, Leeds, Yunnan and Colombo); (c) that it is only a matter of time before the growth in absolute inequality results in a surprisingly large number of violent conflicts, especially if we take

note of inequality across regional, religious and ethnic lines ('horizontal inequalities', Nairobi-Youth Agenda Roundtable).

3.4 Cultural cleavages

Cultural cleavages – within the West and within Islam. (Oslo Roundtable)

Both the Oslo and London Roundtables drew parallels between the impact the Cold War had on development priorities and approaches and the impact the 'war on terror' might have. In the Lilongwe Roundtable, there was a concern that Malawi is aligned too closely to the USA and that this would increase tension with Muslims in Malawi and its neighbours. The Paris Roundtable was the only meeting that mentioned the importance for development of resolving the Israel–Palestine conflict. The Paris participants also stressed the apparently contradictory trends of the globalisation and harmonisation of certain norms of behaviour, for example in regard to genocide, human cloning, torture and the increasing fragmentation and 'retreat into exclusion' along identity lines increasingly defined by religion and culture. But whenever this topic was raised, it was in a way that stressed nuances well beyond a 'clash of civilisations' model. The Oslo Roundtable stressed that cultural cleavages *within* the West and *within* Islam will be equally and perhaps more important for development. Religious fundamentalism in the USA has certainly had consequences for development and development policies in many parts of the world. And the nature of Sunni–Shia relationships are critical to governance, security and international relations in multiple locations. But the Oslo Roundtable participants noted the tendency in development circles to be blind to something one minute and blinded by it the next. They urged caution to not overspecify religion as the cultural cleavage that always matters most. The Ottawa Roundtable thought that race and ethnicity had been underemphasised in development for too long and the Dublin Roundtable asked a most fundamental question: how will networks of trust and reciprocity be shaped by the forthcoming waves of opportunity and risk? It is worthwhile to note that this issue came up more frequently in Roundtables located in the West.

3.5 Climate change

We are all in this together and we can make a difference. (Brighton Roundtable)

Only the Dhaka, Cape Town, Brighton and Dublin Roundtables mentioned climate change explicitly as a priority for development. The Roundtables in Bangkok, Ottawa, Santiago, Leeds, Abuja, Kampala and Yunnan mentioned environmental sustainability in quite general terms. While in the UK climate change seems to be in the headlines nearly every day, the fact that it did not come through loud and clear in the Roundtables is a salutary reminder of how 'issue bubbles' do not necessarily travel well. I would argue that how those with the smallest carbon footprints – but the least ability to manage the big footprints of others – adapt to this new reality, is going to be one of the major development stories of the next 40 years. The issue suffers from the fact that it is perceived as everybody's business, but nobody's responsibility and that its consequences are either contested or manifest in some disguised fashion. While it is slowly attracting the attention of the development sector, I would argue that it is not quickly enough.

3.6 Growing tensions around energy and natural resources

Are future conflicts more likely to be over mineralogy than ideology?⁴

Conflict might be an integral part of development and change – not something that is an aberration; that gets in the way. (Karachi Roundtable)

The almost fourfold rise in the price of crude oil in the last five years has put energy consumption and production centre-stage – whether at the G8 meetings, 'energy-centric nationalisation in Latin America' (Dhaka Roundtable), or China's investments in African energy reserves. Similar rises in the prices of mineral resources have led to an increased interest in Africa from rapidly growing nations and to windfalls for countries rich in such resources. Indeed, the Abuja participants considered movements in the world price of oil to be one of the key risks facing their country in the next ten years, and it was not clear which was the bigger risk – a downward or upward movement. The Cape Town Roundtable, which included several of the Roundtable organisers from elsewhere in Africa, noted that resource-based industrialisation was one key advantage that the continent holds, but worried whether governance structures in Africa and elsewhere were strong enough to prevent the traditional resource curses of distorted investment, rent-seeking, delegitimised

government and, ultimately, conflict. More generally, the Karachi Roundtable noted that, because development approaches tend to be dominated by economic constructs, conflict has been abstracted from development, and it is now time to consider the former a component of the latter. Several Roundtables highlighted issues of over-consumption and the unsustainability of current economic growth models (Bangkok and Sydney), but over-consumption did not seem to capture the imagination of many Roundtable participants.

3.7 The role of outsiders

Africa is still seen as a place to experiment without accountability to African people. (Accra Roundtable)

Authentic sustainable development created by outsiders has something of an oxymoron about it. (Ottawa Roundtable)

Of all development initiatives, the domestic ones had been the most successful. (Dhaka Roundtable)

The challenge for those working on HIV/AIDS interventions is 'how to learn from community responses rather than import Northern solutions. (Brighton Roundtable)

The number of quotes I can include here is an indication of the intense level of discussion this issue generated. Donors were perhaps the easiest target and were often on the receiving end. First, who are donors really accountable to? Not the populations they were trying most to help. Nor, *de facto* to the citizens that pay their salaries: the consequences of donor actions – good and not so good – are much less visible to the donor citizens than are the actions of a ministry in their own country. Second, donors do have to be seen doing something and this can generate two disconnected political spaces, 'one largely virtual, made up of publicised spaces elaborated with and validated by donors and one made up of the overwhelming majority of the population who will not have been involved and will resist change' (Dakar–AFD Roundtable).⁵ Third, donor preferences do affect choices. The Accra Roundtable suggested that donor priorities limited the diversity of manifestos that can be offered by different Ghanaian political parties. Fourth, is accountability being helped or hindered by direct budget support and donor harmonisation (Maputo Roundtable)? In

such a pooled resource environment – with its potential advantages of alignment and country-ownership – it will become harder than ever to trace the consequences of donor actions, at least in terms of outcomes. Fifth, although there is a lot of donor talk about country ownership, few of the Roundtable participants felt that there was genuine ownership by recipient governments, which many thought were more accountable to the donors than to their own citizens. Sixth, there was a sense that the power of the purse strings still imbued donor ideas with a much greater resonance than they deserved and home-grown ideas and solutions were discounted (e.g. social protection was highlighted in the Lilongwe Roundtable as an essentially outsider concept). Seventh, some of the donors recognised the dilemma between wanting to help and not always being able to. In the context of the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Plan (CAADP) the Stockholm Roundtable asked 'how can donors get involved in supporting CAADP without taking away ownership?' They also answered the question 'by signalling commitment to meet capacity gaps identified by African governments'.

Of course, many of these same arguments can be (and were) made about Northern researchers, especially when they are funded by the same donors. We will return to these issues when we discuss the implications for research.

3.8 Capacity

Capacity is by far the most frequently occurring keyword in my background summary of the Roundtable reports. The capacity of donors to deliver reliably in ways driven by the recipients is perceived to be extremely variable, as is their capacity to use knowledge to deliver aid more effectively and unobtrusively. The capacity of recipients to use aid resources effectively is thought to be weak (and if relatively strong on formulation of policy, then weak on implementation, enforcement and negotiation). Parliaments have a weak capacity to hold governments accountable (Nairobi–IDS Roundtable). NGO capacity is dissipated – too many NGOs, especially in new democratic situations, are struggling to find a mission (Abuja and Nairobi–Youth Agenda Roundtables). Civil society does not have the capacity to question those in authority (Phnom Penh, Kampala Roundtables). Researchers are poor at speaking to friendly audiences and are even worse at communicating with non-traditional audiences (the

private sector, the military, ministries that are not development ministries in the North). Researchers in Southern universities (especially in Africa) are poorly supported and have little capacity to hold their governments or NGOs to account. All of the above are notoriously poor in assessing the consequences of their actions and inaction.

Given this widespread lamentation of capacity deficits, and the large amounts of money spent trying to build individual, organisational and institutional capacity, why has the research community not problematised the issue more?

3.9 Population

Few of the Roundtables prioritised population policy as such, but many of them discussed a whole range of demographic issues, such as urbanisation, ageing and migration. It was surprising that urbanisation did not come up more often. Migration was on the agenda of many Roundtables as an issue that clearly has the ability to link North and South, development and security, rights and sovereignty, livelihoods and citizenship. Several Roundtables noted the potential tensions that could be generated from the mismatch in extent regulation of capital flows and labour flows and their politicisation.

It is worth mentioning that many of the Roundtables (especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, most notably the Nairobi-Youth Agenda Roundtable) highlighted the need to connect with youth on issues of development – to inspire, engage and build their commitment to the development of their planet. There was no clear consensus on how well donors or governments were doing in this regard. But one of the Roundtables I attended was at our local high school in Brighton and I was amazed at how knowledgeable the 17-year-old students (admittedly a self-selected group) were about international affairs and development issues. This is partly the result of initiatives such as Make Poverty History – and it may be that the achievement of such movements will only be able to be assessed in 10–20 years' time.

3.10 Convergence?

Problems are not a monopoly of the South and solutions are not a monopoly of the North. (Dakar–CODESRIA Roundtable)

Many points would also have held for France. This is a symptom of the invisible convergence and

globalisation of political consciousness across continents. (Dakar–AFD Roundtable)

Many of the above issues are experienced in multiple locations – generally along income distribution lines. With the emergence of China, and global concerns such as security, migration, climate change and identity, there no longer seems to be 'two (rich and poor) development stories' (Dakar–CODESRIA Roundtable). A more relaxed interpretation would be to posit a family of development stories that can learn from each other. Whether they will converge or not – and whether that even matters – is something for the next 40 years to tell us.

4 Region-specific issues

Given the small number of Roundtables, it is difficult to draw any region-specific conclusions. With 12 Roundtables in ten countries, sub-Saharan Africa might be the exception. I noted five issues that came up much more frequently here than in the other Roundtables

4.1 The legitimacy of government and the transition to democracy

Democracy could have been a really good thing had we built it ourselves. Instead it has fallen from above onto our heads against the background of an asymmetric power relationship. (Dakar–AFD Roundtable)

In Kenya economic and political power are fused and this compromises accountability. (Kenya–Youth Agenda Roundtable)

Participants in the 12 African Roundtables felt that, on balance, the advent of greater democratic space within the ten countries represented has been accompanied by many missed opportunities. The Kampala Roundtable noted that the spaces opened up by the multi-party elections in Uganda had not yet been adequately cultivated by any set of stakeholders. In particular the government was, the participants concluded, obsessed with the short term over the long term – although I cannot think of many democratically elected governments that act differently.

In the Abuja Roundtable held in February 2006, one of the biggest obstacles to development was the issue of Presidential third-termism – the debate paralysed the political process in Nigeria for many

months and was seen as a test of the legitimacy of the government. But now the test seems to have been passed, just. The Abuja Roundtable also stressed the need for political reform (lagging) to accompany economic reform (showing positive movement). As Dudley Seers (1968) noted in the first issue of the *IDS Bulletin* – in many countries the problem is not how to achieve economic advance within a given set of political and social constraints, but how to achieve political and social change within an economic framework that delineates the limits of change.

At the Nairobi-Youth Agenda Roundtable it was suggested that post-colonial investments in Kenya tended to follow colonial designations of high- and low-potential areas and perpetuated regional imbalances that have been difficult to change since independence. Greater democracy has encouraged political movements aligned around these regions and associated ethnicities. These horizontal imbalances or inequalities have crowded out vertical inequalities which are class based and which traditionally offer opportunities for solidarity and to negotiate for better wages and working conditions.

Participants in the Maputo, Addis and Accra Roundtables agreed that decentralisation of government was a good idea in principle, but that the capacity to implement it was sorely lacking and may even be a negative development at that level of capacity.

- **HIV/AIDS.** This was mentioned by several, but not all, of the African Roundtables. The specific issues raised related to the fact that the condition is still seen as an outsider health problem (Maputo Roundtable) and is unnecessarily politicised (Cape Town Roundtable). But all in all I felt a sense that this was an issue where Roundtables felt they needed to ‘tick the box’. I hope my interpretation is wrong.
- **African universities.** The under-investment in African universities, in part a legacy of structural adjustment, was thought to have severely compromised civil society’s ability to hold donors and governments to account. It has also undermined the ability of African researchers to influence the body of knowledge on development with their own constructs, analyses and conclusions. The sometimes uneasy relationships between the universities and the newly

democratic governments was also noted (Abuja, Nairobi-Youth Agenda).

- **Agriculture.** There seemed to be a worry that the rhetoric behind the new donor and government emphasis on agriculture as an engine of growth in Africa would not be matched by action due to the new scramble for resources playing out across the continent. If the opportunities for rent-seeking in energy and mineral resources are more significant and more opaque than in agriculture, some participants feared governments might become distracted. There was also a sense that not enough attention was being paid to past attempts to get agriculture moving and it was still largely conceived of as a technocratic challenge – with few causes for optimism that the attempts would succeed this time around (Addis Ababa, Dakar–AFD, Nairobi–IDS, Lilongwe, Cape Town, Stockholm Roundtables).
- **Regionalism.** The Kampala Roundtable argued for greater East African integration and the Dakar–AFD Roundtable reported that ‘regional integration was deemed a first order necessity by the group’. The reasons for these calls related to reduced transactions costs, improved negotiating positions in international fora and an increased ability to handle cross-border issues.

5 Implications for research

The participants of the Roundtables were both users and producers of research. As such, there was much critical reflection and self-reflection on why development research is done, who researchers are accountable to, who does the research, where it is done, who sets the research agenda and the tools we use.

5.1 Accountability

Do researchers contribute anything beyond justifying more aid? (Paris Roundtable)

Whose agency has development research best served? (Copenhagen Roundtable)

Several Roundtables stressed the normative nature of development research. Development research is worried about the ‘what is’ and the ‘what should be’.⁶ This puts a greater emphasis on us as researchers to be accountable for the influence our work has –

positive, negative or none. But accountable to whom? Typically accountability mechanisms are strongest to peers and to donors. They can also be strong to in-country partners if long-term relationships exist, but the mechanisms are weak when it comes to the people whose lives we say we are trying to improve. The Copenhagen participants wondered if development research has served the agency of researchers more than any other stakeholder. The lack of interest that development researchers have displayed in assessing the influence of their work – in terms of its ethical and practical dimensions – is not terribly encouraging. Some at the Oslo Roundtable wondered if this lack of curiosity betrayed a lack of confidence as to whether our work had any influence at all. The Ottawa participants thought that the extent to which China used Western development research would be a test (of sorts) of usefulness.

5.2 Control of the research agenda

In intellectual terms, the possibility of the Unknown has been removed from the horizons of impoverished and under-capacitated societies such as Sri Lanka. (Colombo Roundtable)

Nearly every Roundtable said that the rich countries had too much influence in determining the research agenda. The main culprits were listed as the World Bank, the donors and the donor-financed Northern research institutes. African universities in particular have been starved of funds for research, and funding levels had not yet recovered from the structural adjustment era – and there was little optimism that the calls for greater investment contained in the Commission for Africa report would be met. Finding ways for greater Southern input into Southern and Northern research agendas was considered a priority. A failure to do so would help perpetuate the two disconnected development spaces highlighted above: one virtual, publicised and elaborated by donors and the other populated by the majority of the population who are supposed to benefit. The model whereby Northern donors fund Southern research organisations in partnership with Northern research partners was welcomed, but it was noted that just as there are ‘aid darlings’ there are ‘development research darlings’ – for obvious reasons, often one and the same (Bangkok Roundtable).⁷ The Kampala Roundtable summed this up by stating that elite research tends to replicate dominant agendas using easy-to-conduct ‘roadside research’.

5.3 Research cannot be outsourced

There is a tension between the complexity of development situations and the urge of donors to engage with simple problems and solutions. (Ottawa Roundtable)

How does the UN think?
(New York Roundtable)

This theme emerged in many contexts. The Madrid, Oslo, Ottawa and Dublin Roundtables focused on the pressures facing donors who are disbursing more money with fewer staff in increasingly difficult contexts such as fragile states or direct budget support. The returns to donors of embedded knowledge – about local politics, about what works where, and about reputations – were thought to be higher than ever and yet the tide is going in the other direction. The Geneva and New York Roundtables focused on UN research capacity. The governance of the UN in terms of respect for sovereignty and diversity led to aspirational apex agreements in which participation had to be built up, often sacrificing conceptual clarity along the way – a clarity that is needed to redefine the UN’s mission over the next 40 years.

At the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) Roundtable in Dakar, the consequences of assuming that universities could be outsourced from Africa was discussed. Too great a dependency on donors meant that there is no independent African research voice to challenge donors, governments or Northern researchers. Finally, in terms of governments, the Phnom Penh and Nairobi–IDS Roundtables highlighted the difficulty of building government capacity to use research findings judiciously in policymaking.

5.4 Development stories

Development research is not about two stories. (Dakar–CODESRIA Roundtable)

The quote here both serves as the section heading and refers to the origins of development research in colonial economics – research ‘of the other’ or how the poor can emulate the rich. If development research finds itself at a crossroads, with one path being a move towards a greater focus on Africa (pretty much the current identity of ‘the other’) and the other being a greater focus on the global family

of development stories with the possibility for cross-learning from each other, the Roundtable participants clearly chose the latter.

As already noted, it was rightly concluded that the North does not have a monopoly on solutions, and nor does the South have a monopoly on problems. Many issues are common to countries with a wide range of human development levels – for example how to manage changing relationships with China and India, getting the balance right between security and rights, stimulating real participation in local government, designing sustainable social welfare, adapting to and mitigating climate change, improving health systems, getting the balance right between immigration, assimilation and multiculturalism and the increasing absolute gap between rich and poor. Many of the best solutions to these issues are home-grown, for example the conditional cash transfer programmes of Mexico, Brazil and South Africa.

Current development funding incentives and research norms tend to pair a Northern research institute with Southern research institutes in relationships that strive to be as equal as possible. The Southern institute works in its own context and the Northern institute collaborates with partners in some of the Southern contexts. While this is an improvement over the model where there were no Southern institutes involved, or where the Southern institutes were subordinate to the Northern partners, the model has a number of failings which were discussed at some length in the Dakar–CODESRIA, Nairobi–IDS, Dublin and Oslo Roundtables. First, comparative work on development issues between the North and the South is foregone. If we believe there is at least as much value in comparing Accra with Alabama as opposed to comparing it with Abuja, then we are missing out – in the North and in the South. Second, we are missing opportunities to connect the origins of issues with the theatres in which they play out. If fundamentalism is brewing in one part of the world and finding unintentional succour in another, far away, we need to be able to connect the two. Finally, we are missing out on multiple perspectives on a given issue. Like the film that shoots the same set of events from the perspective of several protagonists, getting a view on the problems of exclusion and alienation in disadvantaged areas of Brighton, for example, from those familiar with such

issues in Rio and Phnom Penh, may not be such a strange idea. A research model that looks at an issue across a wide range of contexts, unencumbered by labels of North and South, that can connect chains of events across the world and that can see an issue from multiple perspectives – ‘360 degree research’ – has to be more independent, legitimate, rounded, and integrated than current models. It is also likely to be more expensive in terms of funding required and large egos left at the door.

The model also means that the key partnerships would not necessarily be between African researchers and overseas researchers of Africa (Dakar–CODESRIA Roundtable). The more relevant partnership may be between Ghanaian researchers working on, for example, social programmes and Swedish researchers working on social programmes.

If we believe this to be a superior research model, self-declared development research institutes will have to become places that focus on a comparative understanding of development – wherever it occurs or is needed – in a way that encourages symmetric learning between partners and connected analysis across places.

5.5 The role of Northern development research institutions

The development industry has become self-serving with little to justify its contribution to reducing poverty and inequality. (Copenhagen Roundtable)

We are often talking to ourselves. (Brighton Roundtable)

Thus, in light of the above discussion, are development research organisations like IDS part of a dying sector and doomed to irrelevance? That depends on the model of change one chooses to believe at any one time in a particular context. If one believes any of the following, then the answer is no: (a) development agencies still matter in setting the development agenda and Northern institutions, by virtue of a common location and culture are best placed to influence them, (b) other Northern stakeholders – large multinationals, the security sectors, ministries of finance, trade, environment, home affairs or defence matter for development in the South (‘the people who run the world’, Ottawa Roundtable), (c) Northern research institutions can

learn from and play a supportive role in developing the capacity of Southern research institutions and networks (and the majority of Southern Roundtables thought this was a key role for Northern institutes) and (d) Northern research institutes can work with Southern institutes in ways that enhance understanding of development across the widest possible spectrum of contexts (Yunnan, Dhaka and Oslo Roundtables).

5.6 Independence

The market has become the god of development research. (Dakar-CODESRIA Roundtable)

Research must talk about things that cannot easily be talked about in development agencies. (Stockholm Roundtable)

Whichever partnership configuration or specialisations are developed, good research has to be as independent as possible. The perception – worldwide it would seem from the Roundtables – is that ‘he who pays the piper, calls the tune’ (as the Dar es Salaam Roundtable put it). Certain funding sources are more unrestricted than others – some foundations, some research councils – but many are very specific in both short consultancies and sometimes longer-term programmes. Part of this is finding the right equilibrium between the demand for and supply of research, but it is a buyer’s market and will remain so for the next decade or so. Participants felt that the research community needs to convince donors that it is in their interest to be more supply driven – researchers are constantly looking for the next big thing on the horizon. Sometimes they get it spectacularly wrong, but sometimes they get it spectacularly right (e.g. donors have been slow to pick up on the need to assess the actual and potential impacts of China and India on Africa). Difficult as some may find it, researchers have to be braver too – they have to convince themselves and the donors that rather than just speaking to themselves, they are engaged in a dialogue where one of them just happens to be a transitory steward of the money. Such a dialogue is potentially easiest when the development research is done through university funding, and there was a feeling among many Roundtables that universities in the North should be diverting more of their higher education funding to development issues and that universities in the South need funding to do the research that will advance their societies and those of the North.

5.7 Policy relevance

Research should focus on the poetics of the imagination – not only on the politics of the belly. (Abuja Roundtable)

The old chestnut about the nature of the tradeoffs between rigour and relevance were given a thorough airing in many of the Roundtables. For me, the above quote captures the prevailing sentiment: poor quality research no matter how immediately gratifying cannot be policy relevant, but good quality research usually is – but it takes a bit of imagination to make the connections. This is a real concern given the capacity shortages in research consumption in many of the agencies noted above, but the issue is how to direct and connect good quality work to those who need it rather than succumbing to a perpetual cycle of short-term assignments that inevitably result in methodological short cuts. Several Roundtables also highlighted the contradictions between the drive for ‘new’ research results and the vast wealth of knowledge that is untapped or yet to be wrung dry for policy work (Bangkok Roundtable) – either because it is not in the ‘easy to get to’ places (via Google, Google Scholar, or perhaps even Eldis) or because the capacity to access information, even at the click of three buttons, is two, or even three, buttons too many. The São Paulo Roundtable reminded all of us that even if the state can access our good quality policy-relevant information, researchers, at least in Brazil, tend to assume the state is all-powerful and they need to better appreciate the art of the possible.

5.8 Disciplinary pluralism

Doing good development research is not like Sudoku ... it is not about lining up the right technical answers ... human beings are central.⁸ (Dar es Salaam Roundtable)

If behavioural economics continually force us to confront the fact that at certain times and in certain situations humans are not perfectly able or predisposed to accurately weigh up the pros and cons of a series of options, it flings the doors wide open for other disciplines to help us understand human behaviour in an economic policy context.

The Yunnan Roundtable stressed the importance of the culture of Chinese development being understood by its neighbours and of a persistent ‘trade gap in cultural communications between

China and West'. The Dublin Roundtable also stressed the need to work more on the psychological dimensions of development, specifically the conditions that foster an entrepreneurial or a dependency mindset. The need for more expertise in history was highlighted in the Karachi and London Roundtables on security and conflict – issues that frequently rest on decades or even centuries of distrust, real and perceived injustice, and the constant changing of political alliances. The need for more expertise in law is obvious given the issues of global governance and human rights, and more expertise in understanding how people, organisations and institutions build capacity would seem essential, given the centrality of the capacity issues highlighted in the earlier sections. However, any suggested additions to the “club” of disciplines will not necessarily be easy to incorporate into an interdisciplinary approach. As Dudley Seers, writing in the first issue of the *IDS Bulletin* says, interdisciplinarity in 1968 was far from widespread or straightforward and I would venture that this ideal is rarely attained today.

6 Conclusions

We are still digesting the huge wealth of information presented by the Roundtables, so the conclusions we can draw are brief and still open to change.

First, there were a few surprises. Some issues came over more strongly than I expected – donor accountability; the need to target powerful but non-traditional audiences; and the openness to comparative research across the spectrum of contexts, rich and poor. Some issues came out more weakly than I thought they would – science and technology, gender, vulnerability to shocks, hunger and food insecurity. There was also little reflection on the successes of the past 40 years but, to be fair, we did not prompt participants on this. Finally, there was very little mention of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). I raise these issues, not because I have answers to why they differed from my expectations, but just to give you an additional insight into my own prejudices.

Second, although the Roundtable approach yielded a rich body of opinions, values and attitudes, it is difficult – at least for an economist – to steer through it in a ‘balanced’ way. I found it particularly difficult to not be able to get behind each report and

probe more deeply to make my interpretation of what was written more certain. My path through the material has involved hundreds of choices about what, and what not, to include. My take is very partial. I have probably, unconsciously, highlighted the things I am most interested in – personally and institutionally. It would be fascinating for others to go through the same exercise, although my initial comments might put some off (but it could be a good exercise for a student dissertation). Does the approach have value for others? I think it does. We completed the 46 Roundtables on a relatively modest budget of less than £100,000 and large donor agencies should surely be able to commission something more formal, focused and structured.

Third, looking back at the issues raised, it seems clear that it was difficult for the Roundtables (and me) to separate the short-term from the medium-term issues and you will note that I have not attempted to do so. Another reflection on the issues is that they resemble a bit of a shopping list. At least this is the easy reaction – and maybe needs more analysis.

Finally, if the list of issues raised is more descriptive than analytical, and is lacking a conceptual framework to pull it together, the section on the implications for research seems more ‘of a piece’. My interpretation is that the development research community has a lot of work to do: making a serious and sustained effort to assess the influence (or otherwise) of our work; achieving greater independence from donors, while at the same time engaging with policy debates; connecting a wider range of voices and bodies of knowledge in the agenda-setting process; proactively making connections with disciplines not typically associated with development research; taking some responsibility for building both the capacity of researchers and research users and finally, and perhaps most importantly, expanding the geographic scope of the analysis of development – especially in a comparative manner in which researchers from the South team up with researchers from the North to study development in the North.

I will finish with another quote from Dudley Seers, writing in his introduction to the first *IDS Bulletin*:

the development of development studies will, therefore, throw an increasing amount of light on our problems too.

Seers was referring to problems in the UK, but as the Roundtables suggest, development research, if structured as a dispersed but connected family of development stories, can shed light on development

challenges wherever they are faced. Has the time come to turn Seers' statement from a 1968 justification for development studies into its 2006 *raison d'être*?

Notes

- 1 I have taken the easy way out of the 'what is development research' and 'what is development studies' debates. I acknowledge the importance of these issues and I hope this article can provide further input for those debates. But here I have been liberal in defining and interpreting the domain of development research – research that self-defines itself as focused on development (whatever that self-definition), encompassing single and cross-disciplinary work.
- 2 We would like to thank the agencies which provided financial and moral support for the series of Roundtables – they include the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Department for International Development (DFID), the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Irish Aid, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Rockefeller Foundation, Save the Children UK,

- USAID and the World Food Programme. None of these agencies stipulated where the Roundtables should be, or the specifics of what they should focus on, which was essential to maintain the spirit of the exercise.
- 3 Roughly speaking, the speed of computer processors doubles every 18 months.
- 4 I remember hearing this at one of the Roundtables I attended, but cannot find it in any of the reports.
- 5 This analysis echoes that of Bill Easterly in his 2006 book, *White Man's Burden*.
- 6 Although this 'difference' can be overstated – most research would consider itself as aiming to advance humanity.
- 7 Of the 22 African research organisations involved in the 26 current DFID research programme consortia, over half are from South Africa and Ghana.
- 8 A popular numbers puzzle from Japan.

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